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THE AMERICAN FIX: BEST DOSAGE FOR OPTIMAL RESULTS

— Tsuyoshi Sunohara

“The burdens of leadership are often heavy, but the world’s a better place because we have borne them.” In his 2013 remarks, President Obama made the case for strong American leadership.

But how much America? Amid widespread perceptions (outside, but also inside the United States) that the Bush years offered too much, while the Obama years have offered too little, policy-makers and analysts continue to struggle with the question of how far and to what extent US leadership of the democratic world should go.

It is surely clear to every democratic nation that we need a strong America, showing leadership in its commitment to a global system based on universal values such as human rights, freedom of speech, and free trade. And yet, there is obviously a problem here.

Until and unless the matter is resolved, the non-democratic world may be expected to act accordingly: pushing boundaries, in the case of Russia; abolishing them, in the case of ISIS; or building them out of the sea, in the case of China.

While much of the focus in this discussion understandably hones in on the United States—particularly as the presidential election approaches—it is possible that we have underestimated the role of America’s allies in helping to solve the problem.

Asians, like others, are anxious to know the future course of US leadership as well as the strength of America’s commitment to their region. Moves inside Japan that are taking place right now might be instructive.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, amid significant

controversy at home, is determinedly pushing through parliament a law that will re-interpret Article 9 of Japan’s Constitution, which was famously put in place in 1947 at the behest of the United States. Article 9 limits Japan’s ability to use its military for anything other than direct self-defense.

The move would essentially change Article 9 to mean that Japan could now exercise “collective self-defense” by using its military to help any ally anywhere in the world.

“Pacifists” in Tokyo accuse Mr. Abe of wanting to get Japan mixed up in what they term US global hegemonic strategy and warfare around the globe. Some, equally wrongly, fret that it forms part of a new Japanese revisionism.

But this is where the debate in Japan starts to get interesting for the question of the exercise of US power, and how a point of balance may ultimately be found.

Prime Minister Abe reasons that altering this vital part of Japan’s security architecture is not so much designed to project Japanese power in the outside world, as to keep American power projected into East Asia as the anchor to deter any potential threats related to the rise of China.

Indeed, Japan is not the only American ally suffering from strategic anxiety in the 21st century. Concerns grew world-wide after President Obama’s remark in September 2013 that, “America is not the world’s policeman.”

Prime Minister Abe has concluded that more Japan means sufficient America. Or to put it another way: if we are to receive, we need to give, a maxim that has

wider significance and may be illustrated outside the Asia-Pacific region via the heated debates over the disappointingly small number of countries in NATO that meet the recommendation to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense.

This reinterpretation of Japan's Constitution was the most viable and effective option from Mr. Abe's strategic viewpoint to keep the US as an active and leading Pacific power over the next decade and beyond.

The extent of the concern across democratic Asia that the US may one day pull out of the region should not be underestimated.

In order to welcome China as a normal and responsible stakeholder rather than a challenger against the existing global system—like Japan itself was during the 1930s—the US must maintain its commitment to take a lead in any endeavor to defend our liberal internationalism.

It must act with its allies and friends including Japan, South Korea, Australia, and even India, since no other nation, including Japan, can do that alone in the region.

Europeans have expressed similar concerns in their region. While the West is still struggling over how to deal with Russia under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Beijing and Moscow are cautiously but intentionally teaming up to drive a wedge between the US and its allies and friends in Europe and Asia, especially the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan.

Of course, Asians who take an interest in such matters are well aware of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's "Strategic Pivot", and still expect the US to be involved, particularly in its major business relationships.

But to hedge their bets, many are also quietly preparing to get closer to China as the new rising "Master" in the Asia-Pacific region, as are some Europeans with regard to Russia.

Between the pendulum swings of the Bush and Obama years a new consensus on American power may yet be found, and America's allies have a crucial part to play.

By showing Americans that they are responsible partners, mindful of the past, but willing to step up and do their bit, the rest of the democratic world can be instrumental in finding the best dosage of America: optimal for the world, and optimal for America too.

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