

An Absent Japan—Why Human Networks Are More Critical Than Ever *Gaiko Forum, January 2010*

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At the foundation of the stable US-Japan relationship lies a long history of exchanges between a broad spectrum of leaders from the two countries. Today, however, that “invisible” yet critical diplomatic asset is gradually being lost. We need to once again focus our attention on its importance.

The Changing Landscape of Washington DC

It is commonly known that the US capital of Washington DC plays a critical role from the perspective both of America’s domestic politics and of its international relations. Scattered around the city are the White House, the nucleus of this global superpower; the State Department, which manages the country’s international politics; the Department of Defense, which exerts its global influence from that uniquely shaped building known as the Pentagon; and many other government institutions. In addition, it is the site of the majestic Capitol building, home to a US Congress that plays a vital role in the democratic process within America and has a significant impact on the international community as well. Washington DC is certainly a majestic town, yet an appealing town as well.

And yet, when I began regularly visiting there in the mid-1960s, Washington DC was a very quiet town. There were few restaurants, and once night fell there were very few people out on the streets. I was told that most people ate dinner at home.

Over the past 20 to 30 years, Washington DC has undergone dynamic changes. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of restaurants and bars that are doing business until the wee hours of the night, and there is now a tremendous flow of people and cars in and out of the city. In short, Washington’s functions have expanded, and as a result, the number of residents and visitors has rapidly grown as well. The number of lobbyists has unmistakably grown, but in addition, powerful domestic and foreign corporations and business federations, state governments, business associations, and various nonprofit organizations have opened offices in Washington one after another. The international organizations that have headquarters or missions in DC are also increasingly diverse and dynamic. To put it simply, Washington DC has strengthened its role as an important hub not only for the US government’s policymaking process, but also for international policy debate and policy formation.

Symbolic of this new trend is the fact that a good percentage of private policy research institutes have



selected Washington DC as the site for their headquarters or branch offices as they actively carry out their work; among them, the work of the foreign policy think tanks is particularly striking. As foreign policy issues have become more diverse and complex, making intergovernmental cooperation more important than ever, the role of these think tanks has gained increasing prominence. Those working in the US government, as well as those from foreign governments, are being invited to participate in joint research projects, seminars, and international conferences. In addition, a number of countries are sending their government employees to Washington think tanks as research fellows.

These types of activities serve an important role in facilitating the exchange of information, intellectual policy dialogues, joint research, and the creation of human networks at the policy level between the United States and other major nations, and it also further strengthens the capacity of the think tanks themselves. And that is not all. Many major countries place priority on exchanges between members of the US Congress or their staff and members or staff of their own legislatures. And the number of experts from various fields who visit Washington DC has been rising each year.

Taking a Long-Term Perspective on “Effectiveness”

It is troubling to see that, with all of the dynamic changes taking place in the international community and in America—which are particularly prominent in Washington DC—Japan’s presence has become extremely weak. This raises serious concerns from the perspectives of strengthening Japan’s foreign policy capacity, promoting cooperation on global issues of common concern, and building the infrastructure necessary for foreign relations and particularly for US-Japan relations.

In order to understand this trend in greater detail, the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) is currently conducting a study on the theme, “Reinvigorating US-Japan Policy Dialogue and Discussion in a Time of Political Change.” Through this project, we can get a picture of the slump in the types of US-Japan policy dialogues and exchanges described above and the causes that are underlying this trend.

The most significant factor, above all, is the major cut in funding in Japan for this type of policy dialogue and exchange. If we look at the three major funding organizations that have placed priority on funding US-Japan exchange—the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership (CGP), the United States–Japan Foundation (USJF), and the Japan–United States Friendship Commission—their combined program budgets shrank by half in the decade from 1997 to 2007. In particular, grantmaking for policy dialogues and exchanges conducted by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and policy research institutes dropped dramatically from just under \$9 million in 1998 to \$1.1 million in 2007.

Funding from US private foundations for US-Japan relations has also declined significantly, as organizations such as the Ford Foundation, Starr Foundation, Luce Foundation, and Freeman Foundation, which provided major funding in the past, have also pared back their support dramatically. The number of American think tanks that

make Japan a focus of research and exchange has fallen as well, declining by one-third from the level of 20 years ago.

In contrast, this survey has shown that in recent years, the number of joint programs conducted by Washington-based US think tanks in collaboration with Chinese research institutes was more than double that of programs with Japanese institutions. Also the major Washington think tanks have a number of experts on East Asia on their staffs, but while there are currently more than 40 experts on China, there are only 4 senior staff working full time on Japan issues and 7 on Korea. In this context, many American friends are baffled by the decision by two Japanese research institutes to close their Washington branches.

However, it would be totally premature to conclude from these trends that American policy experts and those working on Capitol Hill are no longer interested in Japan. This November, JCIE and the American Council of Young Political Leaders jointly brought a delegation of local politicians and congressional staff members to Japan with support from CGP. The seven delegates, who were selected from among a considerable number of candidates, participated enthusiastically in a two-week program that focused on Japan's domestic politics, Japan's international contributions, and other relevant topics, and that enabled them to return home having forged relationships of trust with numerous young Japanese leaders. This was the 26th time that this exchange had been held since its founding in 1973.

Similarly, the USJF held the 10th US-Japan Leadership Program in Japan this summer, bringing 20 young leaders each from the United States and Japan for a two-week residence program. These exceptional 40 delegates, who won out over an applicant pool that was roughly four to five times the number of slots available, participated enthusiastically in the program. You could sense that, as a result of their direct interaction with Japanese Diet members and staff, as well as through other activities, the participants continued to maintain a strong interest in this substantive program.

Thinking about it in this way, if we are to build the infrastructure needed to continuously maintain and develop US-Japan relations, it is absolutely essential that we increase exchanges between young leaders in various fields—in the legislature, in the intellectual community, in NGOs, etc.—on a stable and institutional basis, that we foster mutual understanding among them, and based on that understanding, that we expand the networks of trust and cooperation. If we look ahead to Japan's future, we can be certain that the funding for these activities, and for the strengthening of the professional staff and institutional capacity required to carry out such programs, will be a truly effective investment.

While I am sympathetic to the recent efforts of the new administration to eliminate the wasteful use of our taxes, the task of building infrastructure takes time and requires continuity. I strongly hope that the newly emerged political leaders will exert their determination and leadership in order to promote these critical efforts.

About the author

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After graduating from Saint Norbert College in Wisconsin, Tadashi Yamamoto earned his MBA from Marquette University. In 1970, he founded the Japan Center for International Exchange and he also organized the Shimoda Conferences, the ASEAN-Japan Dialogue, and the Europe-Japan Conferences, becoming a pioneer in Japan in the field of private-sector international exchange. Yamamoto has published many books, including *Philanthropy & Reconciliation: Rebuilding Postwar US-Japan Relations* (2006).