

# *Introduction*

Since the close of World War II, Japanese and Americans have invested significant energy and resources in strengthening the nongovernmental underpinnings of the US-Japan bilateral relationship in order to ensure that the two countries would never again return to open conflict, and so that they might work together to ensure a more peaceful and prosperous world. However, there is growing evidence that important pillars of the alliance remain weak. In fact, 50 years after Edwin Reischauer famously wrote in *Foreign Affairs* about Japan and America's "broken dialogue," the two countries again face difficulties in maintaining the kind of healthy dialogue on pressing policy issues that is necessitated by the evolving regional and global environment. While these problems differ in scope and substance from what Reischauer identified half a century ago, they nevertheless have important implications for the course of US-Japan relations.

Kent Calder has characterized the decline in human networks as the "quiet crisis" of US-Japan relations, and there is a consensus among foreign policy experts in both countries that the field of US-Japan policy dialogue has, indeed, been moving in the wrong direction. This is somewhat perplexing at a time when Japanese and Americans arguably have had greater cumulative interactions with one another's societies—whether through personal friendships and family ties, travel and study, or exposure to popular culture—than at any other time in history. However, the strong affinity that the publics of each country display for one another has not been mirrored on the institutional side of the relationship. Rather, the institutional channels that sustain interaction between the two countries have begun to wither.

The deterioration of the nongovernmental underpinnings of the bilateral relationship is evident in the challenges facing Japanese studies in US universities, the growing difficulties that grassroots organizations are having in sustaining cultural exchange activities, and the gradual weakening of the organizations in both countries dedicated to promoting exchanges among business leaders. This slide is most apparent, though, in the very area that has the greatest immediate impact on US-Japan relations—the field of nongovernmental policy dialogue and study. The strong affinity that the general publics in the two countries hold for one another does not seem to be translating into deeper and more meaningful policy discussions on US-Japan relations in Washington, where it has become common among some to describe Japan as "invisible." Meanwhile, in Tokyo, the institutions that work to sustain US-Japan policy dialogue are all struggling, and the level and frequency of participation by senior US leaders and experts in policy discussions held on Japanese soil have noticeably declined.

In 2009, the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) launched a study to assess the state of US-Japan policy dialogue and study and to test whether the general perception that it has declined is, indeed, accurate. Over the past 18 months, extensive data were collected, interviews were carried out with nearly 50 American and Japanese policymakers and foreign policy analysts, and roundtables were held—one with Congressional members on Capitol Hill to discuss US-Japan political exchange and a second at the Brookings Institution with nearly 20 key experts active in US-Japan affairs. Based on these, it unfortunately does seem accurate to describe US-Japan policy dialogue and study as facing a quiet crisis.

In concrete terms, this crisis has been manifested in a decline in the number and scope of studies at think tanks and public policy institutions in both countries that take up the issue of US-Japan relations, either on its own or as one component of broader multilateral or global approaches. In fact, the number of think tanks with considerable influence in Washington policy circles that carry out major activities dealing with US-Japan relations has fallen to half of what it was a decade ago, and it is even markedly lower than the level of 20 years earlier. The number of activities focusing on Japan now pales in comparison with those that take up relations with China, and there is some evidence that the field may even be less vibrant than Korean studies. The situation is still direr in Tokyo, where the most important international affairs organizations, which have long been characterized as underfunded and institutionally underdeveloped, are generally in worse condition than they were 10 years ago. Meanwhile, exchanges between political leaders in the two countries—which are often facilitated by nongovernmental institutions—have plummeted. As one example, the number of Congressional visitors to Japan in recent years is a mere 25–30 percent of what was standard in the late 1990s.

Recent tensions in bilateral relations have reminded us that the lack of robust policy dialogue and study holds various perils. Fortunately, there is still a sound base in both countries upon which to revitalize US-Japan policy dialogue and study. There is a deep reservoir of mutual goodwill in each country, a considerable number of people who understand and can operate in both societies, and a strong, if latent, interest in working more closely on a host of issues. Japanese and American interests are closely aligned on many of the major issues in the region, and there are still only a limited number of irritants in the bilateral relationship. And just as much as the misunderstandings and miscalculations that fueled recent basing disputes should serve as a wake-up call to leaders on both sides of the Pacific, the 50th anniversary of the US-Japan alliance should provide a positive impetus for reinvigorating bilateral dialogue.

What is needed, therefore, is a concerted joint initiative to reinvest in the nongovernmental underpinnings of US-Japan policy dialogue and study. This should be accompanied by an effort to make these dialogues more meaningful and effective. Although it is a difficult time for either country to mobilize human and financial

resources, such an investment would be small compared with the potential costs of the alternatives.

This topic has deep personal significance for me, as we are commemorating the 40th anniversary of JCIE's founding this year. However, the issue before us is not simply about the fate of one institution or a handful of organizations; rather, it is about the future of our two countries. Without improvement on this front, mutual misunderstandings are likely to crop up in a more frequent manner, each country's commitment to a strong bilateral relationship is likely to erode, and in the end, this will diminish the strategic positions of both Japan and the United States. Conversely, farsighted and measured steps now to shore up nongovernmental policy dialogue and study can better equip the United States and Japan to cooperate more effectively on the host of regional and global challenges before them, while laying the foundation for a strong and vibrant bilateral partnership for the next 50 years.

Tadashi Yamamoto  
President  
Japan Center for International Exchange