

U.S. President Obama's Japan Visit and Japan-U.S. Energy Cooperation

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U.S. President Barack Obama visited Japan as a state guest for three days from April 23. He held a summit meeting with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on April 24 and issued a Japan-U.S. joint statement on April 25 before leaving for South Korea. He is the first U.S. president to make a state visit to Japan in 18 years, since then President Bill Clinton's visit in 1996.

President Obama and Prime Minister Abe discussed various bilateral topics and issued a joint statement during Obama's Japan visit. Among the topics, Japan-U.S. security cooperation and Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade negotiations attracted the most global attention. Media reports based on the joint statement also focused on the two topics. This is because the two topics exert great influences not only on the two countries but also on the entire world.

On security cooperation, the joint statement received a great deal of attention by calling for enhancing Japan-U.S. cooperative and alliance relations and clarifying U.S. commitments under the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty as extending to all of the territories under the administration of Japan, including the Senkaku Islands. While President Obama demonstrated considerations to China by supporting China's peaceful rise, the Japan-U.S. joint statement went further in checking China.

On TPP, both Japan and the United States had difficulties in making concessions due to their respective domestic conditions and finding a compromise in their negotiations during Obama's Japan visit. In an unusual development, the difficulties led the two countries to delay the joint statement release until just before Obama's departure from Japan. Noting that the two countries "have identified a path forward on important bilateral TPP issues," the statement indicated some progress. But it fell short of announcing any specific agreement. Given that Japan and the United States failed to announce any specific agreement and decided to continue negotiations even after the summit meeting, it is difficult to assess the bilateral negotiations in Tokyo. Media reports were divided over the assessment.

But later news reports indicated the two countries' effective agreement on tariff reductions for Japan's five key farm import categories including beef and pork, and rice. Substantial progress might have thus been made. Ahead of this autumn's congressional midterm election, President

Obama might have wanted to announce a specific agreement before leaving Japan. In this sense, his visit to Japan might not have been a complete success of full marks. But we can view the two countries as having made a step forward in TPP negotiations and security cooperation productively to enhance their alliance and cooperative relations.

The joint statement also covered many other pending Japan-U.S. problems veiled behind the two key topics as mentioned above. Among them, the statement took up energy cooperation just after TPP. Particularly, it clarified the importance of energy security in an attention-attracting manner, stating, "The United States and Japan view energy security as vital to prosperity and stability."

It is also important that Japan and the United States shared and demonstrated to the world the view that the future U.S. liquefied natural gas export expansion will benefit Japan and other strategic partners. Interestingly, in the statement, the United States welcomed "Japan's new Strategic Energy Plan" as including "global, peaceful and safe use of nuclear energy and acceleration of the introduction of renewable energy." This may mean that the United States has applauded Japan as a key U.S. ally for fixing and implementing an energy policy to overcome its vulnerability to energy problems.

The joint statement also touched on the two countries' efforts and cooperation to tackle the climate change problem. In order to form an international agreement on greenhouse gas emission reductions from 2020, "both countries plan to put forward robust post-2020 nationally determined contributions" at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris in December 2015, it reads. Japan and the United States are required to enhance and promote clean energy development to address energy security and the global warming problem. Based on their respective situations, and strengths and weaknesses, they will go ahead with their respective efforts and cooperation.

The joint statement apparently indicated that Japan and the United States are prepared to address energy security and the global warming problem as not only their own challenges but also as Asian or global ones, although the statement fell short of clarifying this point. The two countries may believe that their engagement with Asia is significant, as the center of gravity in the world energy market is shifting to Asia where energy demand is expanding sharply. Enhanced energy cooperation in Asia, particularly East Asia including China, is expected to loom as their key challenge. As the joint statement is titled "the United States and Japan: Shaping the Future of the Asia-Pacific and beyond," it can be naturally taken as calling for the two countries' energy cooperation in Asia.

There is a mountain of common challenges that Japan and the United States should tackle in the future. To address these challenges, the two countries must further deepen and enhance bilateral cooperation through all available measures including the further development of relations

between top leaders and the deepening and expansion of cooperation and collaboration at political, bureaucratic, private, academic and other levels.

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