

# Political Prospects



Yusuke Kataoka

**INTOUCH:** How will relations change between the United States and Japan after the inauguration of Barack Obama?

**Kataoka:** The next administration in the States will adopt a wait-and-see stance to see which party in Japan will be in power after the next general election, which is expected to be called soon. Until then, no drastic or immediate changes will occur in the bilateral relationship between Japan and the United States. Historically, the Japanese government has been more receptive to maintaining relations with the Republicans rather than the Democrats because the Democrats have been painted in the minds of some key members of the Diet as protectionist and not eager to see Japan become a dominant economic power.

**INTOUCH:** What issues are likely to be important for the two countries?

**Kataoka:** Most importantly, I think the Japanese government will ask the US administration to restructure the financial system. Of course, the US will continue to ask Japan to stimulate the domestic economy and not to rely so much on exports. It is also important that the Japanese government form a closer relationship with the US Congress. But because of the different political system, Japanese political leaders don't understand how politics works in Washington, DC. I think it's very important that Japan establishes more person-to-person relationships with American lawmakers.

**INTOUCH:** Has Japan had an easy ride in terms of demands from the Bush administration?

At noon on January 20, Barack Obama will be sworn in as the 44th president of the United States of America. The ceremony on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, DC will mark the beginning of what is sure to be a challenging term for America's first black president.

After a resounding victory over Republican candidate John McCain in last November's presidential election, Obama will take charge of a country that is at the center of a global financial crisis and embroiled in two expensive conflicts overseas. All eyes—not just in the US, but around the world—will be on him as he attempts to repair the national economy as well as fractured relationships abroad.

While President George Bush forged a close relationship with Japan—particularly with charismatic former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi—during his two terms in office, Obama has given few indicators as to what his policy might be with regard to Tokyo.

Yusuke Kataoka is the acting chairman and executive director of the US Foundation for International Economic Policy. *INTOUCH's* Nick Jones recently sat down with the Club Member to discuss the possible impact of Obama's election on US-Japan ties. Excerpts:

**Kataoka:** Compared to the Bush administration, the next administration will be more direct and definitive in terms of its relationship with the Japanese government, regardless of which party is in power. This will necessitate the Japanese government to be more open and frank with the States and other major powers, particularly if Japan is to remain a major economic power. The next government in Japan cannot continue to be Mr Nice Guy to everyone. It is going to be a serious test for the Japanese to put together a road map that will enable Japan to be respected within the world community.

**INTOUCH:** What kinds of requests is Japan likely to receive from the US?

**Kataoka:** To be a true partner of the US-Japan Security Alliance. I'm sure that the US government and Obama will ask Japan to redefine the law pertaining to the Self-Defense Forces—Article 9. But the Japanese people and the government have to think about the reaction from Asian countries, particularly China. We can't afford to have China against Japan. I think that unless the LDP [Liberal Democratic Party] becomes a really powerful party and captures a majority of seats in the Diet, it will not attempt to rewrite Article 9 of the constitution. The government will have to make some sacrifice like making a bigger financial contribution to US military bases here. I think there will be a clearer understanding of the roles that Japan and the United States should play.

**INTOUCH:** During the presidential campaign, there were not many references to Japan and some Japanese

bureaucrats fear that Japan will be of lesser importance to the US. Do you agree with this assessment?

**Kataoka:** Some Foreign Ministry bureaucrats are concerned that Japan may not be treated on an equal footing with other major powers, particularly China. And some of the key members of the LDP have stated that Japan should be more frank in discussions with the US.

**INTOUCH:** How is Obama likely to approach the North Korea issue?

**Kataoka:** I think Obama will continue with the six-party talks because that is the only avenue for dialogue with North Korea. Of course, the US's priority is that North Korea doesn't obtain nuclear weapons. But Obama has to get the economy back on the right track, which will take longer, so he can't afford to spend so much time and money on North Korea. His priority is to carry out his promise to pull out US troops from Iraq, restructure the financial system and make America more prosperous.

**INTOUCH:** How do you feel about future US-Japan relations?

**Kataoka:** I am optimistic about Japan's future relationship with the United States. The next US administration will be pragmatic enough to see what is good for the United States and the world. But the administration will first concentrate on restoring the economy and financial system, which could take at least two to three years. □