

Energizing the U.S.-Japan Security Partnership

The U.S.-Japan political partnership is due for a period of internal reflection and strategic reinvestment.¹ The alliance that has provided the bedrock for U.S. policy in Asia and has been a mainstay, preserving peace and stability for nearly half a century, does not get the attention or recognition it deserves. The security component of the alliance, after a period of intense activity between 1995 and 1998, has also lost some momentum. In terms of real strategic oversight on both sides of the Pacific, the alliance has been on a kind of bureaucratic autopilot for the better part of a decade. There are a number of reasons for this, not least of which has been the tendency to take the benefits of the alliance for granted. Yet, there are important changes underway in the Asian-Pacific security environment that suggest a more activist approach to the alliance is in order. To revitalize the U.S.-Japan security partnership, the new security dimensions of Asia—ranging from dramatic diplomatic developments on the Korean peninsula to increasing tensions across the Taiwan Strait—demand a more intense and high-level focus for the alliance.

What Has Been

For all the talk of the U.S.-Japan security alliance as the cornerstone of U.S. strategy in the Asian and Pacific region, there has not been enough attention by senior U.S. policymakers, commentators, and elites to understand its complexities or sustain its importance. Indeed, except for a brief period of strategic reexamination in 1995—the so-called Nye initiative that culminated in the 1996 Clinton-Hashimoto Security Declaration—the alliance

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has, for more than a decade, been managed by mid-level bureaucrats on both sides of the Pacific. (I must admit here to being one of those mid-level officials, having worked at the Pentagon between 1995 and 2000 on Asian security matters.)

Before making the case for devoting considerably more attention at the highest levels of our government and society to the U.S.-Japan partnership, it is important first to identify the reasons for the previous lack of focus—in both political parties and both the legislative and executive branches of government—to this crucial security partnership.

This is a critical opportunity to influence the course of nascent Japanese security debates.

Perhaps the most important reason for the absence of a sustained effort to engage on common security themes in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War was the growing sense of economic competition and hostility between Japan and the United States marking the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The contrast between a close security partnership and an intense economic rivalry has always made for a difficult coexistence, but, during this period, all balance was lost

with much more time spent on semiconductors, flat glass, and auto parts than the potential conduct of the alliance in a crisis. Furthermore, the strategic implications of the end of the Cold War in Asia were far less immediate or apparent than in Europe. Policymakers in Washington primarily were preoccupied with a succession of continental challenges, including Russian reform efforts, German reunification, NATO expansion, and ultimately the disintegration of Tito's Yugoslavia.

Comparatively, Asia's security issues seemed somewhat remote, and these supposedly secondary concerns were easily shuffled to the back burner. There was also the traditional reticence, even allergy, to explicit examinations of security inside Japan. For many, the delineation of roles and missions between Japan and the United States in the security sphere went something like this: the United States would take care of Japan's security, and Japan, in turn, would not ask any questions. The reality was and is that, for much of the U.S. national security apparatus, nothing could be more comfortable than an ally that provides bases, generous host-nation support, and does not want to be consulted.

More recently, a primary Asian preoccupation of U.S. policymakers in the past five years has been to rebuild relations with China, ties which were virtually nonexistent since the Tiananmen Square action (better U.S.-China ties were also high on the wish list of Japanese policymakers). Perhaps a re-

lated reason for ambivalent attitudes in some quarters to aggressively pursue the security agenda that flowed from the 1996 Security Declaration was China's hostile reaction to the reinvigoration of the security partnership. Since both the United States and to a lesser extent Japan sought to improve relations with China, there was a clear desire to downplay the notion of a "containment strategy," of which the U.S.-Japan partnership was increasingly seen (incorrectly, I might add) as an element. These perceptions exacerbated a split between the "China first" and "Japan first" wings of the Asianist school inside U.S. policymaking circles, a rift that is rarely ever explicit but has nevertheless been exacerbated in recent years.

Any intensive security discourse with Tokyo has primarily been a byproduct of a desire to coax North Korea out of its self-imposed isolation. The unity of purpose among the United States, Japan, and South Korea that was a hallmark of former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry's diplomatic strategy toward North Korea has been seen (correctly) as the essential ingredient in developing an international strategy to deal with Pyongyang. Finally, there probably has been an uneasy feeling at some level in both Japan and the United States that, much like an old marriage, if the two great powers of Asia ever did sit down to talk in a profound way, there may not be much to say; or perhaps more worrying, both sides would disagree fundamentally on basic approaches to peace and stability. This stems in part from the perception in Washington that the recent dialogue with Japan has been of poor quality, focused almost exclusively on obscure operational matters related to the U.S. force presence.

Fundamentally, there has also been an attitude in some quarters that Japan is in the process of a long, slow decline and therefore not as important in future U.S. calculations. There is perhaps a parallel perception in Tokyo of U.S. arrogance and a sense that Washington has done too much lecturing and not enough listening in the infrequent strategic interactions.

What Has Changed

So what has changed from the above state of affairs that requires a profound recommitment of purpose on both sides of the Pacific? The first and most important reason is the uncertain nature of the Asian security environment. Although we generally think of the Asia-Pacific as an arena of boundless commercial possibilities, the security challenges on the horizon should not be underestimated. Asia enjoys the dubious and unprecedented distinction of having every major threat to peace and stability found within what is considered "greater Asia" (by contrast, for the first time in more than a century, there is no comparable danger in Europe). These challenges include the still

highly militarized division of the Korean peninsula, the increasingly unpredictable nature of the cross-strait situation between China and Taiwan, and the dangerous nuclear rivalry between India and Pakistan.

Second, Japan itself is changing and in critical ways. Attitudes about security are in flux, and recurring public and private questions exist about the

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long-term viability of the alliance as it is currently structured. There is also greater sentiment for Japan to play a more “normal” role in the security sphere. Constitutional issues that go to the heart of Japan’s self-defense stance are being debated as never before. Tokyo now wants and should be consulted on security issues that influence Japan. For the United States, this is a critical opportunity to influence the course of these nascent debates. For those who argue that Japan is a “wasting asset” in irreversible decline, it

might be useful to recall that it has only been a decade since it was taken as an article of faith that U.S. power was ebbing on the international scene. It would be foolhardy to underestimate the enduring dimensions of Japanese power, just as it was unwise for some Japanese to dismiss the latent and enduring qualities of U.S. power during the 1988–1993 period of supposed U.S. decline. Japan will continue to play a vital political and economic role in the international system for decades to come.

Third, Asia has witnessed several potentially momentous developments recently that suggest we are on the cusp of a major change in the overall strategic environment in which the U.S.-Japan partnership operates. It is instructive to briefly review just a few of these developments. These include the historic North-South summit on the Korean peninsula; the election and subsequent transfer of power on Taiwan; the crisis in Indonesia and the resulting political dislocation in all of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); an increasingly significant tactical alliance between Russia and China; the rise of China itself; major electoral realignments inside Japan that could affect the security debate; and the inevitable political and operational issues raised by the prospect of both Theater Missile Defense (TMD) and National Missile Defense (NMD). All of these issues require serious consideration within the framework of the U.S.-Japan partnership.

Fourth, there are indeed signs of divergence in perspectives between Washington and Tokyo—for instance, how to deal with challenges across the Taiwan Strait—and it is imperative that these matters be probed and explored in a discreet manner and not overlooked or ignored.

Fifth, the way foreign policy is made in both Japan and the United States is changing in fundamental ways. The role of Congress and the Diet is increasing, making the policy formulation process much more complex. The once-dominant roles of the U.S. State Department and the Japanese Foreign Ministry in the process of policy development has been eclipsed by new actors, particularly the U.S. military and Japanese politicians.

Finally, the growing signs of uneasiness with U.S. presence and military training in Japan should be viewed as the proverbial yellow canary in a coal mine: danger ahead. Certain aspects of U.S. military presence, particularly in Okinawa but not limited to the island prefecture, are becoming deeply divisive issues inside Japan's fractured political system.

What Has to Be Done: Ten Tasks

With the recent past and current situation as a backdrop, what should be done to strengthen and sustain the U.S.-Japan alliance well into this new century? There are ten tasks for the alliance to implement in the period ahead.

EMBARK UPON A BROAD AND SUSTAINED STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

Perhaps the most important step the two governments can take will be to engage in deep, sustained strategic dialogue. The purpose of this endeavor would be for the two sides to compare strategic perceptions on a wide range of critical issues. Topics for strategic dialogue would include the potential for dramatic change on the Korean peninsula, the rise of China, the development of NMD, growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, and the implications of political incoherence inside ASEAN.

A real strategic conversation will be a difficult proposition because the two countries have simply fallen out of the habit of this type of discourse and consequently have not been forced to confront and work through their strategic differences. But with all the indications of profound and fundamental change brewing in Asia (not least of which in the alliance itself), the U.S.-Japan partnership can no longer afford to neglect the necessary house-keeping that is the foundation of any partnership or alliance.

The goal of this mutual endeavor would not only be to review recent events but also to undertake proactive discussions about ways to encourage positive trends and develop contingency thinking for potentially negative setbacks. Since the early origins of the alliance, the partnership has been guided by a small band of dedicated—but narrowly focused—practitioners. The recent history of U.S.-Japan security discourse suggests that it needs a

larger support group inside both societies. Consequently, the process of strategic dialogue must also be broadened beyond the bureaucrats to include key politicians and influential opinion shapers in both societies. Even if no tangible results on the broader security agenda come to fruition, launching a true strategic conversation between Japan and the United States would be a major achievement.

CONSIDER A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR TRILATERAL SECURITY COOPERATION

One of the most important developments of the past five years in the security realm has been the growth of security cooperation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea. As a result, the two U.S. bilateral security alliances have taken on some trilateral characteristics. The initial rationale for cooperation in the mid-1990s was the challenge posed by North Korea. In actuality, that cooperation has expanded into a broader regional security framework. It is time that security specialists in all three countries consider what steps might be possible to provide a more formal trilateral framework. Such an understanding could help reassure the three states as they confront the prospect of fundamental change in North Korea. The goal would be to create institutions and procedures that transcend the division of Korea.

SEEK A 'VIRTUAL TRILATERALISM' AMONG AMERICA, JAPAN, AND CHINA

In contrast with the progress in cooperation and communication with Korea, there has been remarkably little comparable dialogue among the three major powers of Asia: China, the United States, and Japan. It is certainly premature to consider any formal mechanism to accomplish this task, but there are a number of steps in the Track II and official dialogues that could be developed to improve trust and confidence on the margins. A series of complex negotiations is likely to be the root of any form of strategic reassurance among the three. The United States must convince China that it does not seek to contain its rise, and it must persuade Japan that Washington will continue to be a reliable and steady partner. Japan must convince China that it will sincerely deal with the issue of history and persuade the United States that it will continue to support the burden of the U.S. forward presence, both materially and politically. China must convince the United States that it sees Asia as big enough for both of them, now and in the future, and it must accept an increased Japanese role in the security affairs of Asia. It is hard to imagine a continuing future of peace and stability in Asia unless these three powers can negotiate a kind of strategic *modus operandi*. Greater informal trilateral dialogue can also reduce Chinese uncertainties about the purposes behind the U.S.-Japan political and security alliance.

ESTABLISH WORKING GROUPS ON EMERGING SECURITY CHALLENGES

While the primary focus of improving U.S.-Japan cooperation has been in the area of traditional security challenges, there is a clear need to explore emerging threats to peace and stability. For instance, the United States and Japan must strengthen their cooperation in the arena of cyber-security, chemical and biological threats, and associated challenges commonly under the rubric of homeland defense. For these efforts to be successful, participation in the dialogue must be expanded beyond the traditional actors of the ministries of defense and foreign affairs to include key domestic agencies involved in the protection of the critical infrastructure. Furthermore, the intelligence dimension of the alliance must be upgraded to address both these emerging new threats to peace and security as well as the traditional challenges that endure.

We are on the cusp of a major change in the strategic environment.

REEXAMINE ROLES AND MISSIONS OF ARMED FORCES

The United States and Japan have really never formally discussed the future of their security cooperation within the context of a division of their respective roles and missions. This is precisely what is needed to help ensure future collaboration and reduce wasteful redundancies. Although some overlap in mission areas—in maritime surveillance and coastal patrol, for instance—is probably useful, other areas such as heavy-lift transport and national reconnaissance are expensive. Redundant investments in similar military and intelligence technologies suggest an absence of dialogue about the fundamental nature of future security cooperation. An understanding of respective roles and missions is absolutely critical to a smooth functioning and cost-efficient alliance.

REEXAMINE DEFENSE PROCUREMENT COOPERATION

In relation to the larger issue of respective roles and missions for the alliance, it would also be prudent to revisit the way both countries have approached cooperation in the arena of defense procurement. The FSX experience in the 1980s, when the United States and Japan worked together unhappily to build a less-than-satisfactory fighter plane, was a political and military operational disaster for the alliance and has generally left a bad taste on both sides, particularly in Japan. The prospect for cooperating in the development of critical systems on the horizon, such as TMD, will test

the existing system greatly. In an environment of shrinking defense resources on both sides of the Pacific (again, particularly in Japan), it would be valuable to reexamine both the priorities and procedures for potential future areas of procurement cooperation.

CONTINUE TO IMPLEMENT THE DEFENSE GUIDELINES LEGISLATION

The United States and Japan issued a landmark revision of the Defense Guidelines in 1998. These guidelines are in a sense the software or operating system for the U.S.-Japan alliance. They provide the framework for all potential military applications of the alliance, including the defense of Japan, a serious regional contingency, or a humanitarian crisis. Much of the

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legislation associated with the Defense Guidelines has passed the Diet, but the actual implementation of the legislation has lagged behind schedule. Work on serious contingency planning and operational details has languished, largely due to political timidity in Japan and sensitivity to the Japanese desire to engage North Korea (a potential application of the Defense Guidelines in a crisis). This inability to realize the potential of the Defense Guidelines process has been a source of deep frustration to U.S. commanders responsible for

preparing for various situations in the Asia-Pacific region. The principal Japanese concern is probably fear that any significant attention to these issues would trigger political divisions within Japan. The conceit here is a mistaken belief that all the necessary work can be done after the onset of a regional crisis. The reality is that, without serious planning, any significant event would send the alliance into a crisis of its own, leading in all likelihood to a major rupture in relations. For the overall health of the alliance, there must also be a greater focus on its operational dimensions to complement the work in the political and diplomatic aspects.

SEEK GREATER OPERATIONAL AND FACILITY COOPERATION

The current state of respective U.S. and Japanese facilities inside Japan can best be described as separate and unequal. U.S. facilities are much more modern compared with the sometimes rundown appearances and upkeep of Japanese self-defense facilities. This breeds envy among our Japanese brothers-in-arms and is starting to raise larger questions in the Japanese public. Greater cooperation is not only cost-efficient, it is also probably necessary

to ensure the survival of U.S. forces in Japan. Although there are bases and facilities where the United States and Japan share a runway or hangar space, the degree of actual cooperation either in training or operations is very limited (the fairly extensive U.S. and Japanese naval cooperation is probably an exception and a model here). This is partially a result of legal restrictions on certain Japanese military activities. If there is to be a future U.S. and Japanese security alliance with forward-deployed U.S. forces in Japan, however, there must be major rethinking about the need for more shared facilities. The United States and Japan should work to combine more of their defense facilities, with the United States also inviting Japanese forces to share space on what are now U.S.-only bases. Training should be coordinated and synchronized to reduce the dual burden of noise, intrusiveness, and inconvenience from two separate military establishments operating in a small country.

REVIEW U.S. MILITARY TRAINING AND PROCEDURES IN JAPAN

The U.S. government should undertake a thorough review of all military training and standard operating procedures inside Japan. With the end of the Cold War, public sentiment has turned sharply negative because of the noise and intrusiveness of U.S. military activities. Much of U.S. military training is critical to maintain readiness, but some of it is unnecessary. U.S. commanders will sometimes fall back on “this is the way we have always done it” to explain one training activity or another. The culture of interaction between U.S. forces in Japan and the Japanese officials charged with explaining and defending the U.S. military presence in public as well as to the Diet has badly deteriorated. Both sides often approach common problems with inflexible positions and lack appreciation for the other’s perspective. What is necessary here is a new approach to these old problems. The United States must look again at standard operating procedures creatively and flexibly. Which activities might be undertaken elsewhere, such as in the Philippines or Guam? Is the primary rationale for continuing with an established course of training practices simply inertia? Can certain training regimes use simulators? Most important, which activities are absolutely critical and must be maintained? In exchange, the U.S. side would expect much more support from Japanese counterparts in making the public case that these remaining training activities are critical to the readiness and the smooth functioning of the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

SEEK GREATER FLEXIBILITY IN U.S. FORWARD PRESENCE

Maintaining substantial numbers of forward-deployed U.S. forces has been a key ingredient in U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific for nearly half a century.

This presence emphasizes U.S. resolve to shape the strategic environment and respond to challenges to peace and stability when they arise. Continuing this presence has and will continue to be the cornerstone of a successful strategy to preserve peace and stability. With respect to currently deployed U.S. forces in Asia, however, there are simply too many eggs in too few baskets. The United States must begin to undertake a “grand pivot” away from its near-total reliance on northeast Asian bases to a strategy that seeks a variety of operational arrangements and training regimes throughout Asia, including in Southeast Asia and Australia. These arrangements range from completing new military facilities in Singapore, seeking new training opportunities in the Philippines and Thailand, and possibly deepening alliance ties in Australia with a permanent presence on the ground. This anticipates not only the prospect of change on the Korean peninsula but also addresses growing sentiments in some host communities in Japan, particularly in Okinawa, that their burden is simply disproportionate. Operational military doctrine must be revised to allow for the long-term deployments of smaller packages of forces so as to move away from the garrison model. Finally, we must refocus our attentions more on actual military capabilities and away from the total numbers of soldiers, sailors, and marines, when accounting U.S. power and resolve.

Conclusion

The U.S.-Japan security alliance should survive and prosper into the future as the basis for peace and stability in a dynamic Asia. All the necessary conditions are there—a proven track record, generally favorable public attitudes, and clear strategic and military imperatives—to continue an alliance that is indeed the most important security alliance in the world, bar none. For it to thrive, however, it must change in important ways. This process is certain to be challenging and prolonged. The first and most important step that Japan and the United States must take is to acknowledge that deep strategic reflection is in the best interests of the alliance and for the preservation of peace and stability in a larger Asia.

Note

1. For recent excellent treatments of the state of U.S.-Japan security ties, see Michael J. Green, “The Forgotten Player,” *National Interest* (Summer 2000): 42–49; Yoichi Funabashi, *Alliance Adrift* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1999); and Jim Mann, “Why Japan Is Now a Forgotten Player,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 2000.