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The US-Japan Alliance: Beyond Futenma

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Over the past several years, and especially since September's historic change of government in Japan, it has become clear that there is a need to reassess the US-Japan alliance to ensure that it is equipped to face the challenges of the 21st century. There have been changes in Japan that are now reflected in domestic politics, but we cannot ignore the fact that there have been important changes in the regional context as well. China's rise is apparent to everyone, and there is now a consensus view that East Asia is becoming an engine of growth whose dynamism is benefiting the world.

Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has spoken frequently of two lofty concepts that arise out of a recognition that the regional context has changed: the desirability of forging an "East Asian community" and the need to have a more equal US-Japan relationship. What is missing in this talk, however, is a clear articulation of how to link the goals of a strong and more balanced US-Japan relationship with a vision of regional community that is equipped to deal with the changes unfolding before us. Although some observers may see these aims as inconsistent or even mutually exclusive, they can be complementary. In fact, effectively coordinating them should be the focus of intense and forward-looking discussions between Japan and the United States.

Reassessing the US-Japan Alliance

As the world around us changes, we should not be shy about analyzing the costs and benefits of the US-Japan alliance and acknowledging that it needs to continue to benefit both parties in order to retain its meaning and political support. The central agreement of the alliance is encapsulated in two of its articles: Article V in essence commits the United States to defend Japan from attack, while Article VI basically pledges Japan to provide basing facilities for the United States to use in the protection of Japan and the maintenance of regional security. A hardnosed analysis of this trade-off does indeed show that it continues to yield important strategic benefits for both Japan and the United States.

The benefits for Japan are clear. The alliance was conceived during the Cold War as a mechanism to protect Japan from a single looming threat—the Soviet Union—that has since disappeared. However, the end of the Cold War has not eliminated Japan's need for some sort of deterrence capacity. Nearby countries such as China and Russia have nuclear capabilities and North Korea is developing its capability. Japan cannot ignore this.

But even putting aside the critical issue of the US nuclear umbrella, it is clear that the alliance helps

Japan immensely, given the uncertainties in the region. For example, Japan benefits on purely economic grounds. It has maintained its defense budget at less than one percent of GDP for historical reasons, but it is difficult to imagine how Japan's low levels of defense spending could be sustained without US protection.

The alliance continues to yield crucial benefits for the United States as well. One thing that has not changed is the fact that the alliance makes it less costly for the United States to maintain defense capabilities closer to potential trouble spots in the region. This better enables it to quickly deploy substantial forces in the case of regional contingencies, and it enhances the US capacity to promote stability in Asia.

Furthermore, although the wording of bilateral agreements does not get into this, there is no avoiding the fact that US forward deployment in Japan also benefits US strategy elsewhere in the world. The Seventh Fleet, which is homeported at Yokosuka, is dispatched to protect sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and to undertake other missions outside the immediate region. Meanwhile, it is no secret that US Marines based in Okinawa are not solely there for the defense of Japan. They rotate around the world, and many of those who come to Okinawa for training are eventually deployed to Afghanistan or the Middle East.

Shouldering the Burdens of Security

The evidence is overwhelming that the security alliance continues to be justified by the benefits it provides to both countries. However, one vital issue that needs to be carefully managed is the distribution of the burdens of the alliance.

On the one hand, there is a sense in the United States that Japan does not contribute as much to the security alliance as it should. Nevertheless, the reality is that Japan has taken important measures over the past two decades to assume a larger role. It expanded its role with the 1997 revision of the Japan-US Defense Guidelines and the 1999 Surrounding Areas Emergency Measures Law. Then, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, the Diet passed the groundbreaking Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law to allow the dispatch of Japanese Self Defense Forces outside of the region, and this was eventually used to enable them to be deployed to Iraq and to permit refueling operations in the Indian Ocean. Japan has been moving in the right direction, although there is more it should do.

On the other hand, it is important to recognize that the burden of maintaining the US-Japan security alliance has been disproportionately shouldered by local citizens in a few areas in Japan, especially in Okinawa. In today's world, it is natural for people in a place like Okinawa, which hosts 75 percent of the US military facilities for the entire country of Japan, to be bothered by the presence of foreign bases and another country's soldiers, with all the disruption they inevitably bring. If local relations cannot be managed skillfully, the entire US-Japan security alliance can be put at risk.

The Japanese and US governments established the SACO [Special Action Committee on Okinawa] process in 1995 to work to reduce the US military footprint, but unfortunately they have not yet put in place a precise implementation plan for the reversion of the Marine Corps base, Futenma Air Station, which is in a heavily populated area and has become a prominent issue in bilateral relations. The relocation of the base to new facilities in Okinawa simply cannot be implemented without eventually gaining the acquiescence of local communities. Given all of the time and energy that has gone into pushing forward the current agreement, it is entirely understandable for the US government to claim that there is no alternative to the existing relocation agreement. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that there has been a sea change in Japan. The Democratic Party of Japan came to power on the strength of a campaign that, in part, opposed the current agreement, and the local community of Nago voted on January 24 to repudiate the base move to their city in a mayoral election that was widely perceived as a referendum on the relocation plan. Democratic governments have to find some way to respond to the voices of their people, and the Japanese government cannot simply disregard these pressures.

Deepening the Alliance

The US-Japan alliance is too important to be put at risk over politics, particularly over the fate of a single base. Instead, we need to handle issues such as the Futenma relocation in a way that does not damage the alliance. To do this, we should operate with a broader perspective and take a number of joint steps that are explicitly linked to one another.

Immediately Begin Joint Consultations on Futenma Relocation Plan

Fundamentally, both the US and Japanese governments understand that it is necessary to reduce the burden of bases on the local populations. Therefore, it is important for them to engage in an ongoing effort to reduce the size and footprint of the proposed new facility, which requires a thorough analysis of the operational requirements it fulfills. Even if it turns out that there is no other viable alternative to the current agreement, more thought needs to be given to reducing the facility's scope and consolidating functions elsewhere. For example, it may be best to consider dropping the idea of a runway for fixed-wing aircraft in the planned new facilities, instead using existing runways elsewhere, while keeping a much smaller heliport in the plans.

Having said this, one thing we cannot forget is that any solution to the Futenma problem has to be the product of joint work between two allies, not the product of confrontational negotiations. The US approach seems to be to wait for Japan to come up with a plan, as Prime Minister Hatoyama has promised to do, and then to respond to it. However, this may not be the right way to go. Once any country's political parties publicly commit to a plan that is so high profile in nature, it is extraordinarily difficult to convince them to back down from their position. The creation of a plan cannot just be a case of Japan deciding what it wishes to do, then going back and forth with the US government. Instead, it needs to be the product of joint work. If we are to have a successful outcome that accommodates the interests of both countries, it is crucial for the United States to enter into deep consultations with Japanese leaders as soon as possible, before Japanese political leaders' positions become entrenched.

Give Greater Consideration to Strengthening Japan's Contributions

With the changes unfolding in Japan and the world around it, Japan also needs to think seriously about how it can better contribute to international security. Japan needs to be taking on a greater share of the burden of ensuring international security, for example by supporting peacekeeping operations, but it has serious limitations under the current legal framework. The cabinet needs to consider if it is still right to stick to the existing interpretation of constitutional prohibitions on the use of force, and the issue of collective self-defense must be reviewed in full detail. The basis for this examination should be the broader legitimacy of potential actions in the regional and global context.

Going a step further, Japan needs to be more proactive in creating a better security environment in East Asia. Prime Minister Hatoyama rightly talks about the need for an equal US-Japan partnership and the importance of East Asia community. But when those in Asia talk about East Asia community, they cannot separate this from discussions of the role of the United States, which has been the region's security guarantor. To go this route, Japan has to begin seriously discussing how to create a better security architecture in the region in partnership with the United States.

One can envision a regional security architecture that bridges the need for a robust US-Japan alliance and the importance of constructing an East Asia community. This can be best described using the analogy of a building with four floors. The first floor should be bilateral alliances such as the US-Japan, US-Korea, and US-Australia alliances. All other floors rest upon this one. Moving up, the second floor is trilateral arrangements and forums, including US-Japan-Korea cooperation, a China-Japan-Korea relationship that builds trust even while focusing mainly on economic issues, and, hopefully, some sort of official China-Japan-US trilateral forum. The third floor would consist of subregional arrangements, most prominently ASEAN in Southeast Asia and an eventual successor to the Six Party Talks in Northeast Asia. And the fourth floor would involve regional arrangements, preferably an action-oriented institution with broad participation from the East Asia Summit countries and the United States that would be designed to respond to a host of nontraditional security issues such as disaster relief, terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.* These types of multi-layered institutional arrangements can provide the proper direction for the evolution of the US-Japan alliance as the basis for the regional security architecture.

* One option is this author's proposal for an East Asia Security Forum. See "East Asia Community Building: Toward an East Asia Security Forum," *East Asia Insights*, April 2007.

Launch a US-Japan Commission on the Future of the Alliance

President Obama's scheduled visit to Japan in November 2010 provides excellent timing for a joint statement on the US-Japan security alliance, coming as it does during the 50th anniversary of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. Any statement should be substantive in nature and forward looking, not merely consisting of platitudes, and for this reason it is important that consultation on the broad outlines of it start right away. Meanwhile, Japan is undergoing an important revision of its National Defense Program Guidelines that should be completed by the end of 2010. It is important to link this to American and Japanese consultations on their vision for regional security and on how to better share their defense burdens.

For this purpose, the Japanese and American governments should consider launching a high-profile joint commission to examine the US-Japan alliance and chart a way forward for it. Japan has long been accustomed to dealing with security affairs in a closed room, but it has become clear that there is now a need for greater transparency and active public involvement in the national security debate. This can be aided greatly by a bilateral commission that involves not just government bureaucrats but also politicians, public intellectuals, and representatives of civil society. While the immediate rationale for this review is linked to the changes in governments in both countries and the desire to make the 50th anniversary of the alliance more forward looking—rather than a mere celebration of the past—fundamentally it is needed because the security situation in Asia is changing dramatically with the rise of powers such as China and India and the emergence of new nontraditional challenges. Therefore, the commission should have a broad mandate, covering issues running the gamut from basing facilities and the nuclear umbrella to the regional role of the US-Japan alliance and the future of the regional security architecture. Ideally, its deliberations would start in the spring and could help set the general parameters for a November 2010 US-Japan statement on the alliance.

Naturally, such a commission could help soothe tensions that will inevitably arise in the aftermath of a final decision on the Futenma relocation plan. But its major contribution would be to encourage Japan to come up with a much clearer and more coherent national security policy. Japan has long avoided in-depth discussions of national security, in a sense closing its eyes and waiting for the United States to save the day. Japan and the world have changed, though, and this is no longer possible, so the time has come for a broader public discussion of Japan's role in ensuring its own security and in contributing to international security. Defense issues should not be further politicized in Japan, but without defense policy being placed on the domestic political agenda, it will be difficult for Japan to escape the current pattern in which issues are taken up in an overly narrow manner—such as the Futenma relocation plan being examined merely from the perspective of the local burden—so this can instead be discussed in a healthier, broader context.

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An objective assessment of the US-Japan alliance reveals that it continues to benefit both countries and play an essential role in maintaining peace and security in the region. However, saving it from narrow debates such as the one over the Futenma relocation plan requires flexibility and far-sighted thinking from both sides and, most importantly, it means that they should jointly consult with each other as allies rather than negotiate as adversaries.

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