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The U.S.-Japan Alliance Redefined

by Patrick M. Cronin

Conclusions

- In April 1996, in one of the most important bilateral summit meetings in the history of the U.S.-Japan alliance, President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto convincingly reaffirmed the significance of the security relationship to the emerging security environment.
- Alliance managers in both countries faced growing pressure to reduce U.S. troop presence, particularly in Okinawa. An interim report of the Special Action Committee on Okinawa, released just prior to the summit, recommending the return of one-fifth of the total acreage (including the Futenma Air Station) of U.S. facilities to Okinawa within the next 5-to-7 years, won a ringing endorsement from most Japanese.
- The two leaders were able to focus on a Japan-U.S. Joint Security Declaration on Security which publicly articulated the alliance's goal: to provide regional stability and build a broader, more durable security architecture for the Asia-Pacific area.
- Challenges to the summit's success could arise from two sources: exaggerated public understanding within Japan and the United States over what to expect from the other partner, and miscalculations of other regional actors, especially the potential for China to perceive U.S.-Japan collaboration as threatening.

An Historic Summit

The bilateral summit exceeded expectations; it should prove to be a pivotal moment in the alliance's history. Three reasons are fundamental to its success.

The first is rooted in the **overlapping national interests** of Japan and the United States. Simply put, if the two wealthiest Pacific democracies were to preserve the stability and prosperity of the region on which their countries depend, they would have to successfully mold their Cold War alliance into an effective instrument of policy for the post-Cold War era. That process, spurred by debate over Okinawa and Chinese and North Korean actions, has now begun in earnest.

A second and more specific reason for the success was the **dogged preparation** undertaken by government officials in Washington and Tokyo. The summit did not occur as a last-minute photo opportunity, but instead came only after 18 months of tireless diplomacy begun by former Assistant

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Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye, and continued by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Kurt Campbell and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Tom Hubbard.

The third reason is the remarkable degree of **political consensus** achieved in both countries over the past year and a half. Various leading Republican specialists provided a steady stream of ideas to the Democratic Administration; for instance, there was no more forceful advocate for boldly redefining the alliance than Ambassador Richard Armitage, former Assistant Secretary of Defense under the Reagan Administration. On the Japanese side, perhaps the most striking instance of nonpartisanship was the example set by then Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama. As a member of the Social Democratic Party of Japan, Mr. Murayama actively encouraged the security dialogue and helped to set the mood for the eventual summit by meeting with Vice President Al Gore in November 1995. Yet only two years previously, Mr. Murayama's party had adhered to the dogmatic position that the alliance was unconstitutional.

Trust and Reciprocity

Although the summit achieved several concrete steps, the more essential accomplishments were less tangible: increased trust, and the promise of greater partnership and reciprocity in the relationship. It is because of this larger perception of the relationship that so many see the summit more as a redefinition than a simple reaffirmation of the alliance.

Hence, the foremost achievement of the summit was the restoration of a high degree of certitude in U.S.-Japan relations overall. Trust had been eroding because of the disappearance of the Soviet threat, the rise of trade tensions, and inertia or inattentiveness to alliance management. The official channel for security coordination, the Security Consultative Committee, involves regular meetings between defense and foreign ministry officials on both sides. This official channel worked well in the late-1980s, but the overall U.S.-Japan dialogue since 1990 had declined in candor, thereby losing some of its effectiveness. A central purpose of the security initiative, begun at the end of 1994, was to restore the dialogue's vitality. In this regard, the summit was an unqualified success.

Alliance managers on both sides also saw a need to broaden support for the alliance. In Japan, public support plummeted after the rape of a Japanese schoolgirl last year. The alliance faced a serious crisis because of the gap in perceptions between Japanese officials and the public. Post-summit polls, however, demonstrate overwhelming (about 80 percent) support for the U.S.-Japan alliance. A crucial reason for that support is the impact of the interim report of the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO), which was set up last November to help accelerate consolidation of U.S. forces in Okinawa. The report, issued the day before the summit began, recommended a 20 percent decrease in the total acreage of U.S. facilities in Okinawa (more than all the land returned since the United States began returning portions of Okinawa to Japan in 1972), the return of Futenma Air Station, and more restrictive operational practices to address the complaints of the local population. The seriousness of these steps was welcomed by most Japanese, even while the United States was able to maintain its current force level of more than 45,000 in Japan.

A second achievement, enshrined in the Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security issued by the two leaders, was a clear articulation of the alliance's rationale in the post-Cold War era. The Prime Minister and the President "reaffirmed that the Japan-U.S. security relationship, based on the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security..., remains the cornerstone for achieving common security objectives, and for maintaining a stable and prosperous environment for the Asia-Pacific region as we enter the 21st century."

The leaders redefined the alliance in terms of both uncertainties and opportunities. To hedge against regional "instability and uncertainty," the bilateral security relationship will become a more effective vehicle for coordinating policies to prevent pre-war crises from arising and, in the event of a crisis, it will be a seamless web of security access, support and interoperability. The alliance has essentially been transformed from one oriented primarily on Article 5 of the Mutual Security Treaty (MST)--the narrow self-defense of Japan--toward one more balanced between Articles 5 and 6--regional security.

A third achievement has been to continue to spark a broad public debate in Japan on its role and the importance of the alliance. Because of the legacy of World War II in Japan, pacifism is deeply rooted in the popular mindset; and, as a consequence of the American security umbrella, many Japanese assume that security is as automatic and plentiful as oxygen. While Japanese officials have long known otherwise, there is a chasm between the policy-making elite and the electorate in Japan about the responsibilities of creating and preserving regional security.

Also, defense work has occurred in a largely an opaque fashion, handled by the bureaucrats more than publicly elected officials. Too often host nation support was viewed as a "sympathy budget" to the "declining" United States. As a result of the recent U.S.-Japan dialogue, Japan's new National Defense Program Outline released in November 1995 stressed how the alliance was in Japan's national interest. Since then there has been more written in the Japanese press on this than in all previous 10 years. Japan crossed the threshold of the past alliance relationship of a patron-client into a more equal partnership, with each alliance partner making contributions commensurate with its overall national strength. While those contributions will continue to reflect comparative advantages and constitutional and legal limitations on both sides, the marker has been laid down by the Japanese Government for Japan to increase its role in regional and (through peace operations and humanitarian assistance) international security affairs.

The public debate is likely to widen if not deepen in Japan in the months ahead because the President and the Prime Minister also agreed at the summit to undertake a reexamination of the 1978 Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation. The 1978 Guidelines called for focusing bilateral defense cooperation on:

- the deterrence of aggression
- actions in response to an armed attack against Japan
- Japan-U.S. cooperation in the case of external crises affecting Japan's security.

The likely scenario is that the leaders will conduct a 2 plus 2 meeting, perhaps in the fall, and provide a broad statement of direction for future Defense Guidelines--to be followed in 1997 by the new guidelines themselves.

The official review--to be undertaken through the Security Consultative Committee--is likely to focus on several issues, including: (1) Japanese contributions to regional crises; (2) expanded base access and facilities cooperation; material, logistical, infrastructure, and repair support; and some operational cooperation (within the limits of the MST and the Japanese Constitution); (3) enhanced cooperation on international peace operations and humanitarian assistance; and (4) multilateral cooperation and confidence building measures.

Misperception and Miscalculation

The major policy debate for the U.S. and Japan is "how far to go." While the outcome of future debate is unknown, there are some natural brakes that will prevent significant discontinuities in policy. In that regard, it is important to be clear about the challenges confronting alliance managers in both nations.

One major challenge is to minimize excessive public misunderstanding between Japan and the United States. Americans might now expect too much from Japan in a crisis, whether on the Korean peninsula, in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, or the Persian Gulf. For instance, the Mutual Security Treaty's Article 6 for regional security limits Japan to an ill-defined "Far East," but whatever the boundaries of that, it does not include the Persian Gulf. Second, Taiwan remains a potential weak link in the alliance, as Japanese people would be more likely to see a crisis across the strait as an internal Chinese matter, while many Americans might be less likely to do so. The American public should appreciate that alliance coordination and planning is working better, closer, with more trust and certitude today--important prerequisites for an effective alliance--but public opinion in each country could differ in times of crisis.

On the Japanese side, some see a U.S. attempt to push Japan beyond the boundaries of its peace constitution. The Secretary of Defense has explicitly stated that U.S. cooperation will be within the framework of the Security Treaty and the Constitution. Japan's constitution has some flexibility. Under it and Article 9 of the MST, for instance, it is entirely possible that Japanese officials would be able to do what is necessary without having to resolve a constitutional battle over Japan's right to "collective self defense." It is appropriate for the United States to call for more certitude and reciprocity, but it is for the Japanese public to decide how they should interpret their constitution.

Economic Clashes--Security Partners

Some might suppose that the security summit will also solve the economic clashes that have occurred between the two countries in recent years. Economics as a factor in international relations will continue to strike close to home. However, economics and security are two largely separate but related legs to the relationship between the two countries: if one is ailing, then the other will be affected. Coercive leverage against another major power seems counterproductive. Hopefully, the United States has moved beyond the trade imbalance as the sole measurement of bilateral relations.

The largest dissenting element against the summit, and the security reaffirmation, comes from revisionists who believe that Japan remains a free rider and that the United States loses economic benefits by playing the dominant policeman role in the Asia-Pacific (clearly losing contracts to the French after the Taiwan Strait dispute this winter). The extent to which the summit has set the stage for greater Japanese contributions undercuts the fundamental argument of the revisionists.

External Challenges

However, a larger challenge to the alliance's redefinition comes not from the U.S. or Japan but from the other countries of the region, particularly in Northeast Asia.

First, there is a need to harmonize the relationship with the ROK. Attempts to reinvigorate the U.S.-ROK alliance would be a long overdue effort. Trilateral diplomacy is also essential to effective understanding. The leaders of Japan and the ROK need to restore more civility and cooperation--which suffered over the past year during the Korean elections and due to enhanced Chinese diplomacy with the ROK, often at Japanese expense. And, if a 2 + 2 mechanism can be established to effect a soft landing for North Korea, Japan will surely be asked to play an important role--perhaps brought into the process

the same time as Russia. Limitations in the U.S.-Japan alliance will quickly be met without equivalent efforts in the U.S.-ROK alliance. This is a role increasingly familiar to Tokyo, and a way for Japan to make a real contribution to regional security.

The key issue is China, which probably perceives the success of this summit as a setback for Chinese foreign policy. The United States and Japan must work together to assist China's integration. In the past 20 years, no country has benefitted as much from the stability provided by the U.S.-Japan alliance as China. If the alliance is aimed at stability and not containment, then Tokyo and Washington must promote a regional security environment that could win Chinese cooperation. Of course, only the Chinese can decide the extent of that cooperation.

The late Seiki Nishihiro said his concern was that the U.S.-Japan alliance was not secure--not "locked in" for the 21st century. His concern was that the end of the alliance would instantly change all terms of reference for Asian-Pacific countries in how they viewed security and that such a colossal change should not be tested. The leaders of the United States and Japan, with tremendous bipartisan support, have finally taken the critical first steps toward assuming mutual stewardship responsibilities for the 21st century.

Recommendations

- Follow through with building greater public trust and alliance reciprocity by seriously reviewing Defense Guidelines. The Guidelines can help further convert the alliance's old focus on primarily Article 5 of the MST to a more balanced emphasis between Articles 5 and 6.
- Avoid asking Japan to do too much.
- Avert public misperceptions by encouraging greater public discourse and transparency on the role of the alliance and increased parliamentary exchanges.
- Capitalize on progress made so far by implementing the SACO recommendations to reduce the burden on the Okinawans.
- Harmonize the U.S.-Japan alliance with the U.S.-ROK alliance. Although the bilateral alliance with South Korea remains able to defeat aggression from the North, it is less prepared to adapt to a situation in which peninsular tensions are radically reduced. The United States needs to look at the future of the relationship with South Korea by drawing Korea into trilateral diplomacy with Japan so these alliances are not working at cross purposes but are instead mutually reinforcing.
- Use the U.S.-Japan alliance to facilitate China's integration into regional and international institutions and dialogues. By seeking a common policy with key allies in East Asia and perhaps in Europe, the United States can help encourage Chinese leaders to cooperate on a wide range of issues that go well beyond the security sphere. Unless China can be integrated, the alliance risks polarizing East Asia, which would have unknown, but surely detrimental, effects on East Asia's dynamism.

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