



The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Relic of a Bygone Era?

By Michael Auslin

The U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation was signed in Washington, D.C., fifty years ago this month. Few alliances last half a century. The fact that this one has is a testament to its strength, but it is also the result of East Asia's failure to develop stable political and security relationships in the decades after World War II. It also reflects Japan's postwar political realities and the choices successive Japanese governments made to maintain the country's largely pacifist global role. Yet, the pressures on the alliance today raise questions about how well it can adapt to changes inside Japan, the United States, and throughout Asia. If the alliance is to survive, how should it change to best serve the evolving national interests of Japan and the United States?

The anniversary being celebrated this month is not for the first security treaty between Japan and the United States. In 1951, immediately upon conclusion of the San Francisco Peace Treaty that ended the American occupation of Japan, Washington and Tokyo signed a Bilateral Security Treaty that set the precedent for U.S. military forces to stay in Japan, "so as to deter armed attack" upon the country. Yet, as the treaty went on to say, the United States held the "expectation . . . that Japan will itself increasingly assume responsibility for its own defense against direct and indirect aggression."¹

Thus the template for postwar U.S.-Japan security cooperation was determined just as Japan regained sovereignty: U.S. forces in large numbers would remain in Japan on bases on the main islands and in U.S.-controlled Okinawa, while Washington would continually express hope that Japanese governments would rearm the country sufficiently for self-defense purposes. The United States developed this new relationship with Japan due to global challenges, specifically the postwar

emergence of a competition between the Soviet Union and the United States. Although it had been a bitter enemy for four years, Japan immediately became America's postwar strategic linchpin in the Pacific, a position to which Japan's leadership acquiesced in exchange for security guarantees and the freedom to focus scarce resources on national rebuilding.² From a strategic perspective, the U.S. presence in Japan acted as a bulwark

Key points in this Outlook:

- The U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation has helped maintain peace in Asia for the past fifty years.
- Security-related issues regarding North Korea's nuclear-weapons program and China's growing military raise important political questions for the future of the alliance.
- Today, the Obama and Hatoyama administrations must decide if they view the alliance as a key element in their security strategies or as an outdated relic of a bygone era.

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against Soviet expansion in Northeast Asia, and the alliance became the cornerstone of U.S. policy in Asia. The triumph of Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party in 1949 and North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950—events that left Japan the only major non-Communist country in Northeast Asia—cemented the importance to the United States of maintaining Japan as its key Pacific partner.

By the time the United States and Japan renegotiated the security treaty in 1960, crises were emerging in Berlin, Cuba, and Indochina. Yet, the 1960 treaty largely followed the 1951 agreement in focusing primarily on Japan's defense and only secondarily on the issue of "international peace and security in the Far East" (as it was expressed in Article IV). The core of the 1960 alliance agreement rests in Article V, which commits both parties to "act to meet the common danger" of an armed attack against either, but with the caveat that each would so act "in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes."³ This would prove to become a significant issue in alliance relations once the Cabinet Legislation Bureau determined in 1981 that Japan's postwar constitution did not allow for the exercise of the right of collective self-defense.⁴ Despite such limitations, the Japanese decision to allow long-term U.S. bases on its soil, and the American willingness to maintain those bases, represented a fundamentally different U.S. presence in Asia than had been the case before World War II. The permanent U.S. presence meant that Asia's overall development, both economic and political, and the role of Japan in promoting that development, became factors in U.S. global strategy.

The battle over Europe may have been the centerpiece of the cold war, but the liberal internationalist order President Harry S Truman created, and which his successors—Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson—continued, could not have succeeded without a resolute U.S. commitment to Asia. As a base of military operations during the Korean War, Japan allowed the U.S. Air Force and Navy to hold their presence on the war-torn peninsula and eventually struggle to a negotiated ceasefire.⁵ These events proved to Washington policymakers that if the United States wished to maintain its regional presence and not surrender to what it believed to be a united Communist front

between the Soviet Union and China, then Japan was the military key to holding Northeast Asia in the same way that the Philippines served to anchor the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia.

During these decades, however, Washington's security calculations ceased to be the sole strategic rationale for the alliance with Japan. During the 1960s, Japan's economic boom commenced, and the country's real gross domestic product grew at an annual rate of 8.9 percent. While growth slowed dramatically during the 1970s due to the oil shocks, by that time, Japan had become the world's key exporter of high-tech consumer goods, steel, ships, and automobiles. In other words, Japan had become crucial to global economic growth and, increasingly, the health of the U.S. economy. From one perspective, then, the U.S.-Japan alliance became committed to defending Japan against any potential threat that could harm the new economic powerhouse. And with the Soviet Union attempting to spread its influence in Southeast Asia, Japan's role as a northern bulwark against Communism was highlighted by its successful capitalist economy, which other modernizing nations, such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, were emulating as a model.

New Challenges and the Search for More Equality

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the cold war ended, and along with it, much of the preceding decades' rationale for the alliance disappeared. Under leader Deng Xiaoping, China fully embarked on a domestic-growth plan that put a premium on trade relations and economic liberalization, all of which benefited Japanese and U.S. companies that rushed in to do business with China. While the Clinton administration saw China as a "strategic partner," believing that economic relations would be sufficient for preserving peace in Asia, security specialists increasingly saw post-cold war stability as fragile and lacking the bonds of trust among Asian states that would allow them to solve serious disputes among themselves. Indeed, as the decade wore on, China emerged more clearly as a potential security threat when it began upgrading its military, including its strategic missile corps, although, in general, the People's

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Liberation Army was very underdeveloped. In 1996, however, China fired ballistic missiles off the coast of Taiwan in an attempt to intimidate the island's prodemocracy voters before a presidential election. In response, the United States sent two aircraft-carrier battle groups into the Taiwan Strait in a clear message to Beijing not to upset regional stability or pressure Taiwan into accommodating China.

At the same time, the Kim family regime in North Korea commenced a two-decades-long effort to develop nuclear power and eventually obtain atomic weapons. The United States was drawn further into East Asia's underlying instability, as several crises throughout the decade brought Washington and Pyongyang to the brink of a military clash, particularly in 1993. The Korean crises demonstrated to both U.S. and Japanese officials that despite the alliance, the two countries were not realistically prepared to act together in cases of regional conflict. Due in part to this realization and to China's new

power, as well as to the rape of an Okinawan schoolgirl by a group of U.S. Marines in 1995, the two allies agreed in 1996 to reform the alliance. This culminated in the 1997 revised U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines.⁶ Through negotiations with the Clinton administration, the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) was revised, and Tokyo agreed to take greater responsibility for its own defense by playing a more active role in supporting U.S. troops engaged in operations in areas surrounding Japan.

Events over the next years only highlighted the new challenges facing the alliance and the need for more joint cooperation. In 1998, Pyongyang launched a Taepodong ballistic missile over Japanese territory, signaling Japan's vulnerability to such weapons of mass destruction and providing further impetus for defense modernization. The Japan Defense Agency immediately began working with the U.S. Department of Defense to upgrade Japan's missile-defense capabilities. For its part, the United States agreed not only to license Japanese production of advanced antiballistic missile systems, but also to increase the sharing of intelligence and to station more U.S. Navy Aegis-equipped destroyers outfitted with missile defenses in Japanese waters. Yet restrictions on collective self-defense, as well as the general inviolability of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, continued to limit the amount

of joint planning the allies could do and raised concerns in Washington that Japan would employ its military in a crisis only under narrow circumstances.

An unexpected test of the U.S.-Japan alliance came with the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Japan's new prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, quickly moved to support President George W. Bush's war on al Qaeda and the Taliban and later in the invasion of

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Iraq. Japan dispatched Self-Defense Forces (SDF)—including Air Maritime SDF—to Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Indian Ocean in a variety of support and logistical roles. This appeared to mark a decisive break from Tokyo's traditional unwillingness to become involved in global security crises. Koizumi's actions were in stark contrast with what had happened in 1991, when Japan's government, under Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki, refused to provide support for the first Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm).

Some of the groundwork for Koizumi's new approach had been laid even before the 2000 U.S. election, when a panel of

U.S.-Japan experts led by Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye published a report on the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance.⁷ The panel was in close contact with Japanese counterparts and provided a road map for alliance relations that fit the preferences of Koizumi and other Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leaders like Shinzo Abe. Still, the impetus for Koizumi's action came primarily from his own belief that Japan needed to adopt a more global role and from his political willingness to push through the Diet the various Special Measures Laws that would allow Japan to dispatch noncombatant SDF to the Middle East.

Over the next half-decade, Japan's SDF would be engaged in one operation or another, even after both Koizumi and Abe had left office. Yet Abe's sudden resignation after barely a year in office signaled the beginning of a retrenchment of Japanese security operations abroad. Abe came to power with an ambitious program for reforming Japan's national security mechanisms in ways that would allow Japan to participate even more fully with U.S. forces and, thus, expand the scope of the alliance along the lines envisioned by the Armitage-Nye report. Among his goals were a revision of Article 9, the creation of a Japanese National Security Council, increased military budgets, and a more centralized intelligence

organization. Abe's resignation and the succession of Yasuo Fukuda, a compromise LDP premier elected after Abe's departure, halted all of these plans. For the next two years, a weakened LDP had no ability or will to discuss the future of the alliance with the United States.

The Road Ahead

The half-century celebration of the U.S.-Japan alliance comes at a time of continuing change in Asia, as well as in Japan and the United States. China's rise to economic, political, and military prominence has significantly changed conditions in Asia since the 1990s. At the same time, new governments in Tokyo and Washington have pledged dramatic breaks with the recent past and have promised to focus more on domestic issues than foreign ones. With the current global economic crisis and the continuing wars in the Middle East and South Asia, pressures on the alliance to define its role in the coming years have mounted.

The Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) rise to power seems to have fundamentally shifted Japan's political landscape. While U.S. administration turnover between the Democratic and Republican parties is common, the accession of an opposition party to power in Japan for the first time in over fifty years has raised questions as to the future of the alliance under DPJ rule. U.S. observers have been watching Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama closely, listening to his statements about basing Japan's foreign policy on the concept of "fraternity," or *yuai*, as well as his call for a new East Asian Community centered on the trilateral relationship of Japan, China, and South Korea. The U.S. role in Hatoyama's grand strategy is unknown, although he has repeatedly stated that the relationship with America, in other words the alliance, is the "cornerstone" of Japanese security for the foreseeable future.

As of January 2010, however, the new Japanese and U.S. administrations find themselves in a rare, public dispute over fulfilling the 2006 agreement on realigning U.S. forces in Japan. Of particular controversy is the move of the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma, in Okinawa, to a new location on the same island at Camp Schwab. Hatoyama has repeatedly called for a

renegotiation of the agreement, which would also affect the timetable for moving eight thousand U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam, as well as the consolidation and return of other areas on Okinawa used by U.S. forces to Okinawa's government. Both U.S. and Japanese diplomats have traded sharp words over the fate of the agreement, and a failure to come to an acceptable resolution would certainly cast a pall on U.S.-Japan relations during

President Barack Obama's term in office.

Already, senior observers on both sides of the Pacific worry that the unresolved disagreement is doing significant damage to long-term political relations. Yet, if the overall goal of the realignment process is to allow U.S. forces to maintain their presence in Northeast Asia while minimizing the burden placed on the Japanese host areas, then the agreement as a whole should be fulfilled as planned.

Of greater concern for the long-term viability of the alliance is whether Washington and Tokyo continue to share common political and security goals for maintaining East Asian stability and prosperity. As the North Korean nuclear crisis continues to drag on, both sides retain their focus on missile defense, which now has resulted in several successful interception tests by Japanese

Maritime SDF destroyers outfitted with Aegis antimissile systems.⁸ Yet, with Tokyo beginning to reduce its commitment to future missile-defense systems and with no current political movement on negotiations with North Korea (the six-party talks), it is unclear whether Washington and Tokyo share the same vision for dealing with Pyongyang. Further, Japan's demand that the status of its citizens abducted by North Korea be fully resolved has also caused strains within the alliance, since the Bush administration treated such concerns as secondary to the goal of achieving North Korean denuclearization. Considering the failure so far to end Pyongyang's nuclear programs, U.S. unwillingness to pressure North Korea on the abductees issue has resulted in subdued, yet real, resentment on the part of some Japanese officials. That said, Japanese support for the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (to stop the export of illicit materials) and United Nations sanctions against North Korea have allowed the allies to work together to control the maritime domain in Northeast Asia.

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Japan and the United States share the same strategic conundrum regarding China: how can each country maintain and develop economic relations with China while attempting to hedge against its growing military capabilities? The U.S. Navy and the Japanese Maritime SDF are particularly concerned about the power of China's Navy, which now has over sixty submarines and increasing numbers of destroyers, patrol ships, Coast Guard-equivalent vessels, and the like. With China stating that it plans to build several aircraft carriers, alliance military planners are questioning why Beijing is developing power-projection capabilities that could be used to deny access to U.S. naval ships and to control strategic waterways.⁹ Similarly, the growth of the Chinese Air Force's fighter squadrons, including advanced 4.5 generation fighter planes, indicates that the United States, along with alliance partners like Japan, may not have air superiority in the case of a conflict with China (such as over the Taiwan Strait) in the future. This, combined with the expansion of China's strategic rocket forces, complicates the alliance's plans for ensuring peace and stability in Northeast Asia. On top of such strategic changes, the Obama administration's decision to halt America's F-22 Raptor fleet at 187 planes and not to allow export variants of the Raptor also leaves Japanese planners uncertain about whether the United States will continue to maintain a credible regional force to protect Japan.

These security-related issues raise important political questions for the future of the alliance. Neither Washington nor Tokyo wants to see trade and political relations with China deteriorate, but both naturally question why Beijing continues to build such powerful military capabilities. When Japanese and U.S. leaders inserted a clause on their interest in peaceful resolution of territorial issues in the Taiwan Straits in their 2005 Security Consultative Committee joint statement, Beijing's negative reaction led them to remove the words in subsequent official statements.¹⁰ Given the alliance's stated commitment to respond to "situations in areas surrounding Japan,"¹¹ however, concerns over Beijing's unwillingness to work more closely with regional powers on security issues have raised the question of how the alliance can work together to shape Chinese behavior in positive ways for regional stability.

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Beyond issues of China and North Korea, it appears the grander aspirations of the early Bush-Koizumi years to create a "global U.S.-Japan alliance" have now been scaled back. As evidence of this, observers point to the Hatoyama administration's decision to end the Japanese Maritime SDF's eight-year Indian Ocean refueling effort in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. It is perhaps more correct, however, to recognize

today that each partner in the alliance has global interests that each can work with the other to protect. Tokyo's recent decision to contribute nearly \$5 billion toward reconstruction in Afghanistan is a symbol of the Hatoyama administration's attempts to play a leading role in nontraditional security operations. Similarly, the recent Japanese Maritime SDF mission off the coast of Somalia to conduct antipiracy operations is a good example of Japan rethinking its global security role. Tokyo determined that such a commitment was in Japan's national interests and dispatched two destroyers and two P-3 airborne surveillance planes to protect Japanese shipping. These ships are interacting with the U.S.-led international Combined Task Force 151, providing information and maintaining open sea lanes. While this is not an alliance operation, Japan's working alongside U.S. naval vessels indicates how political priorities the alliance partners share can be expressed in ad-hoc activities in and outside of the Asia-Pacific region. This may portend a relationship in which Washington cannot take Tokyo's support or participation for granted; instead, both sides will have to work out how best to interact, even over shared concerns, after each has chosen a particular policy.

Still, the various challenges the alliance faces in Asia should occupy the attention of strategists and operations planners and should lead to continued close cooperation and a set of shared strategic objectives. The ballistic-missile threat from North Korea and the steady growth of Chinese missile, maritime, and air forces will only increase in coming decades. These threaten regional stability and can be used to target not just population centers, but also Japanese and U.S. military forces that could be used to deter or defeat such threats. Thus, continued cooperation on ballistic-missile defense should be of the utmost priority to the alliance. Indeed, missile and air defense, along with antisubmarine warfare, should be

expanded to encompass other friendly countries, such as South Korea and Australia, thereby building off of current maritime-cooperation activities.

Ultimately, however, the credibility of the alliance will rest on the combination of military capability and willingness to maintain stability in Asia that each partner possesses. In this regard, then, the Obama administration's moves to cut advanced weapons systems such as the F-22 and to scale back missile-defense plans naturally raise questions about long-term U.S. military capabilities in the Pacific. Will the Obama administration maintain U.S. force levels in Asia at their current strength? Moreover, what are the Hatoyama administration's defense-spending plans? Japan must make decisions regarding its fighter-experimental (F-X) fighter program, but will Japan commit to building more surface ships and the surveillance systems needed to maintain its own capabilities?

In this regard, the alliance must continue to rest on a basis of traditional "hard power." Clearly, the two allies should continue to research, develop, and deploy missile-defense systems on land and sea. Moreover, they must keep up their conventional forces, including advanced fighter aircraft, submarines, surface vessels, and intelligence and surveillance systems. This is, and will continue to be, expensive, especially in a time of reduced budgets, but the goal of preserving peace requires a formidable military deterrent to any country that may be thinking of employing force to obtain its objectives or to obtain asymmetric advantages that can negate U.S. and Japanese military superiority.

No matter how vigilant and capable the two countries remain, however, peace in the Asia-Pacific region cannot be upheld solely by the United States and Japan. A successful system of regional security cooperation requires the efforts of many states. Indeed, one way to maintain the alliance's importance in coming years is to create some regional trilateral or quadrilateral mechanisms with the U.S.-Japan alliance at the core. Two natural groupings would be Japan-U.S.-South Korea and Japan-U.S.-Australia. These countries already have limited ongoing trilateral discussions and policies, but expanding basic security cooperation, joint exercises, information sharing, and disaster relief, for example, can

help build a community of shared interests among liberal allies in the Asia-Pacific region.

Taking such an approach will also help the alliance work together to engage China. Japan and the United States have common economic and political interests with China, and coordinating outreach to China can help set clear benchmarks for progress on many issues, including climate change, confidence building, and trade promotion. It does not make sense for Tokyo and Washington always to deal with Beijing independently given

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these common interests, although each country will follow its own policies and national goals when talking with China. Given the concerns both the United States and Japan have about China's military buildup or the effects of Chinese industry on pollution, joint efforts to begin dialogues with China or presenting a shared position may be extremely useful.

The alliance has served as the cornerstone of Japanese defense and East Asian stability for fifty years. It has done so because of the willingness of both Japan and the United States to bear heavy burdens. Without Japanese support and bases, there would be no credible U.S. military

presence in Asia. Without the alliance, there is no assurance that the peace among the major powers in the past fifty years would have continued, nor that they would have been able to develop their economies to the degree they have. For this reason, the alliance should continue and maintain its core focus on defending Japan and maintaining stability in East Asia.

That said, the alliance has always required delicate political management by Tokyo and Washington. The two countries have often disagreed on issues of host nation support, SOFA, base location, and joint training. That is natural, and the efforts of thousands of bureaucrats over the past five decades have maintained a positive working relationship. Perhaps the most worrisome trend today is the slow erosion of trust between alliance managers on both sides of the Pacific and a growing sense of frustration with each other. Today, as East Asia changes dramatically—with the rise of China, the continuation of economic integration, and the potential spread of weapons of mass destruction—the Obama and Hatoyama administrations must decide if they view the alliance as a key element in their security strategies or as an outdated relic of a bygone era.

There are great benefits to be had throughout Asia from closer economic integration, but greater dangers if old territorial or historical disputes are not resolved peacefully. If Asia is to continue to be the engine of global economic growth, then Japan's role is indispensable as the leading liberal democratic nation with a civil society based on individual freedom and the rule of law. In playing both a regional and global role, it is natural for Japan to work with the United States to promote the values and policies that have most benefited both countries. The same holds true for the United States, which will continue to be the underwriter of global and regional security for the foreseeable future. The costs and difficulties of maintaining the alliance are far outweighed by the benefits the alliance continues to bring to Japan, the United States, and Asia as a whole.

Notes

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