



## **U.S.-Japan Relations: The Need for Strategic Dialogue**

by Ralph A. Cossa

Are the United States and Japan ready for a more equal, mature security partnership? Signs are increasingly pointing to “yes” although both sides still seem more comfortable paying lip service to this concept than to actually pursuing it.

Many in Washington and Tokyo have, for years now, called for more comprehensive bilateral strategic dialogue. All too often, however, this dialogue takes the form of Washington pronouncing its strategic wisdom, which Japanese officials then accept with a polite bow of the head. The two sides have always been capable of heated disagreement and debate on technical and tactical (as well as economic) issues. But, when it comes to grand strategy, traditionally it has been a one-sided dialogue.

This is changing. When Japanese officials and senior security analysts call for more strategic dialogue today, they actually mean it. This came through loud and clear during a recent San Francisco informal gathering of current and former foreign ministry and defense officials and security analysts from the U.S. and Japan that was co-sponsored by Pacific Forum. While few participants argued that the relationship was in trouble – “on the surface relations are as smooth as they have been in years” – one common lament was the lack of real dialogue on the issues that matter most.

The most obvious of these is the prospects for conflict across the Taiwan Strait following the election of the Democratic Progressive Party’s candidate, Chen Shui-bian, as Taiwan’s next president. Realistically speaking, Japan would not have the luxury of sitting this one out if the U.S. chose to intervene after an unprovoked attack. Minimal Japanese political and logistical support would certainly be expected.

There are a host of other issues where greater strategic dialogue is needed. What is the future role of U.S. forces and bases in Asia, especially if and when Korean Peninsula tensions are reduced or resolved? How can Japan most effectively and least provocatively contribute to enhanced regional security? How can both sides more effectively cooperate on a wide variety of global issues ranging from non-proliferation and disarmament to environmental threats to regional economic stability? The list goes on and on! The issues, for the most part, are not new. What is new is an increased Japanese willingness, if not a sense of urgency, to debate them.

A variety of factors have contributed to this increased willingness on the part of Japanese officials to enter into the strategic dialogue. In part, it reflects attitudinal changes associated with Japan’s gradual yet steady quest to be seen as a more “normal” nation. Related to, and helping to drive this is generational change. The emerging post-war generation of

Japanese officials and parliamentarians are not as burdened with the past as their fathers and grandfathers. They do not deny Japan’s early 20th century history. But they do refuse to be personally branded by events that happened long before they were born. While lectures about the past from bitter neighbors caused their fathers to offer more and more apologies (and to write bigger and bigger checks), this generation considers such comments as insulting, especially when they come from countries like China that have benefitted greatly in recent years from Japanese largess.

There is another, more troubling, reason the Japanese are insisting on more strategic dialogue – Washington appears both more capable and more willing to take actions unilaterally that can profoundly affect Japan’s national security interests. Does the U.S. still share Japan’s commitment to arms control and disarmament and global non-proliferation? Does anyone in Washington even care what a unilateral U.S. rejection of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty would mean to Japan? Will the current or next U.S. administration resist the dual temptation of viewing Beijing either as its enemy or its strategic partner and instead follow Japan’s model of more open-eyed constructive but cautious engagement? Will the Congress mandate a more confrontational policy toward North Korea or China?

Tokyo has finally figured out that it needs to at least try to insert its voice as issues that seriously impact its future are being debated.

There is, of course, an equally important companion question: If Japan speaks out, will anyone listen? Is Washington ready for a meaningful (i.e., potentially contentious) strategic dialogue with Japan? Again signs tentatively point to yes. Within the current administration, at least among those who focus on Asia, there appears to be a genuine desire for a more reasoned debate on these issues. Many are as interested as their Japanese counterparts in seeing the U.S. answer the above questions correctly. Those responsible for alliance maintenance have long believed that the impact on “America’s most important bilateral relationship, bar none” (as Mike Mansfield called it) should be an essential element in any Washington debate over core security issues. (How far up the Clinton/Gore administration’s chain of command this thinking prevails remains to be seen, however.)

On the Republican side, Ambassador Richard Armitage’s call at the mid-March San Francisco security seminar for a “new covenant” between the U.S. and Japan is even more encouraging. Armitage, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense and current member of Governor Bush’s advisory team, envisioned this covenant as encompassing economic and financial as well as geopolitical and security issues. It was, he said, a vital step in developing a “mature security partnership.”

The time has clearly come to begin the strategic dialogue. The challenge for Japan, amidst the noise of the American presidential campaign, is to shout loud enough to be heard. It then behooves Washington to listen.

*Ralph A. Cossa is Executive Director of Pacific Forum CSIS.*