



## **Changing Asia needs the U.S.-Japan alliance**

by Brad Glosserman

Much recent U.S. strategic thinking about Asia has focused on China or the prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea. These concerns have overshadowed important changes in Japan that have been influenced in part by developments in those two countries. Transformation in Japan, changes occurring elsewhere in the region, and in the U.S. itself, add entirely new meaning to former U.S. Ambassador Mike Mansfield's mantra, "the Japan-U.S. relationship is the most important bilateral relationship, bar none."

The '90s were a tumultuous decade for Japan. They were marked by trade conflicts with the U.S., regional security crises – the first North Korean nuclear crisis, the 1995 rape of an Okinawa schoolgirl by U.S. servicemen, the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the 1998 Taepodong missile test that overflowed the archipelago, and North Korean spy boat incursions – and doubts about the solidity of the alliance with the U.S. As a result, Japan was forced to revisit basic assumptions about security thinking – the role of the United Nations and the rule of law in maintaining international order, the peacefulness of the neighborhood, and the foundation of its alliance with the U.S.

Afterward, Tokyo – rightly, in my mind – decided that there was no real alternative to its U.S.-centered security policy. The challenge for Japan was figuring out ways to strengthen that relationship and ensure that there would be no reduction in the U.S. commitment to Japan's defense without alienating or antagonizing the Japanese public and its neighbors.

The result has been a series of steps – the 1996 Joint Declaration between Bill Clinton and then Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro, the 1997 revised guidelines for bilateral defense cooperation and amendments to the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement that allow Japan to better cooperate with the U.S. in emergencies, institutionalized mechanisms to lessen the burden of the U.S. military presence on Okinawa, more extensive cooperation on the global war on terror (including unprecedented deployments of Japanese forces to the Indian Ocean and Iraq), readiness to participate in missile defense – that has solidified the alliance. At the same time, Japan has begun a historical revamp of its domestic security posture and thinking: long-overdue legislation to facilitate a response in an emergency has been passed, crisis management mechanisms have been created, and, most critically, the country has embarked on a critical assessment of the constitution and the legal interpretation of provisions that govern participation in international security affairs. In other words, Japan appears to be embracing greater realism in security.

The changes in Japan have gone largely unnoticed, except among the shrinking community of Japan watchers. The oversight is easy to explain. First, interest in Japan generally has been waning: contrast Japan's stagnation with China's dynamism and most Asia watchers will focus on the latter. Second, the changes are largely internal and incremental. They don't attract a lot of headlines.

But the changes in Japan and the new solidity of the U.S.-Japan alliance couldn't come at a better time.

China's rise is bringing about a tectonic shift in the international system. China is getting wealthier, and its growth is a springboard for its neighbors, too. Much of Japan's recent recovery is the result of China's voracious appetite for imports. If Asia is finally taking its place as the third pillar of the global economy – with all the political influence that goes with it – then China gets much of the credit. Internally, China's wealth is fueling military modernization, which could alter the regional balance of power. Externally, it provides a foundation for a confidence and dynamism in Beijing that is transforming diplomacy and economic relations in East Asia.

The Republic of Korea is undergoing a transition of its own as a younger generation assumes power in Seoul. This group has different views of relations with North Korea and Beijing: it is less inclined to see both as a threat to South Korea's immediate security and is more willing than its predecessors to engage them. It is also more critical of the U.S. and more skeptical of the alliance with Washington, challenging the assumption that it brings more benefits than costs. While there is no indication that Seoul is ready to end the alliance, it does wish to redefine that relationship.

As South Korea evolves, so too is the U.S. force posture in the region (and worldwide). The U.S. has announced a shift in the global deployment of its military, and while many changes are still undetermined, South Korea will be affected. U.S. forces on the Peninsula will be reduced and redeployed. Changes make sense given the nature of new security threats, but the manner in which the changes are announced and the timing are critical: they could encourage the (mistaken) view that U.S. moves are in response to ROK domestic politics, and intended to punish Koreans for anti-American protests. Badly handled, redeployments could undermine an alliance that is crucial to security and stability in East Asia.

All of these changes are contributing to and affected by broader forces that are reshaping the entire region. One of the most significant – and most difficult to define – is the emergence of an East Asian identity. The notion of "Asia" as something more than a purely geographic concept is finally taking shape. Credit the ASEAN Plus Three process for providing the skeleton for this evolution. This group provides the barest of bones – but it's a skeleton nonetheless – for the

institutionalization of Asia. For sure, it's a long way off, but it does provide an organizational structure for East Asia, and one that can challenge the conventional U.S. role in Asia.

To be clear, this process is not a necessarily a threat to the U.S. or its interests in the region (certainly not any more than the EU is in Europe). But ignored or mishandled, it can be. That's why a strengthened and rejuvenated alliance with Japan is so important. Of course, all the traditional rationales for the alliance still exist. But amid the changes in the region, the bilateral alliance becomes even more important. Bases in Japan ensure access to Asia during a contingency. The alliance checks the perception of U.S. withdrawal from the region during redeployment. It solidifies the U.S. link to "Asia" as the region emerges as a global player.

Finally, the alliance provides reassurance about Japanese intentions as that country continues its own transformation on security issues.

Japan's security evolution will accelerate. Earlier this month, the Prime Minister's Council on Security and Defense Capabilities released its report on the future of Japanese security policy. It anticipates many of the issues that will be discussed in depth in the National Defense Program Outline that will be released at the end of the year. The Council report calls for a strengthened alliance and modernizing the Self-Defense Forces to facilitate coordination between Washington and Tokyo and allow the SDF to better respond to 21<sup>st</sup> century contingencies. That means moving away from a force structure designed to repel an invasion to a mobile force ready to deploy to low-intensity conflicts – and the capabilities needed to make that possible can worry Japan's neighbors.

Again, to be clear, fears of a remilitarized or "aggressive" Japan are groundless. But concerns exist, and the bilateral alliance can help smooth Japan's emergence as a bigger player in regional security affairs.

Asia's dynamism puts a premium on stability and security, and the cool and careful handling of relations between the U.S. and Japan has contributed to both. Plainly, the U.S.-Japan alliance is becoming increasingly important to both nations' interests – and those of the entire region – in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The last few years have provided welcome reassurance that alliance management continues to be a priority in both countries. That should not change, no matter who wins the U.S. elections in November.

*Brad Glosserman is director of research at Pacific Forum CSIS. He can be reached at [bradgpf@hawaii.rr.com](mailto:bradgpf@hawaii.rr.com)*