

Question for Tokyo: Remember ANZUS?

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The headlines associated with Defense Secretary Robert Gates' recent visit to Japan notwithstanding, relations between Washington and Tokyo are not as strained as they may appear . . . at least not yet. But there is no question that improper handling of a number of sensitive issues before, or worse yet during President Obama's scheduled Nov. 12-13 visit to Tokyo could help weaken an alliance that the two sides have spent almost 50 years building.

The Okinawa base issue has grabbed the lion's share of the headlines over what has been portrayed as an "ultimatum" from Gates that "it is time to move on," combined with his warning that pulling apart the current (previously agreed upon) plan would be "immensely complicated and counterproductive." But Gates also pointed out that "we are very sympathetic to the desire of the new government in Japan to review the realignment road map," further noting that "we have not talked in terms of a time limit, but rather the need to progress as quickly as possible." He further noted that "modest change" on the Futenma Air base relocation issue was a matter between Tokyo and the Okinawan government and people (who have thrice signaled acceptance of the plan).

Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio clearly does not want to be rushed on this issue; efforts to publicly push him are likely to be counterproductive. But he has also pledged to take local opinions into account and to make a final decision once his administration's review process is over. In discussing the issue, the prime minister also noted that "there are still numerous causes for concern in the Asia-Pacific region. The deterrence capability of U.S. forces in Okinawa is also necessary for the security of our country." With a bit of patience, there could yet be a happy ending. The key for both sides is not to make this an issue of contention during President Obama's visit.

This bit of cautious optimism aside, there are a number of other sensitive issues that could just as easily put new strains on the alliance if not properly handled. One centers around Prime Minister Hatoyama's apparent determination to unveil details of an alleged "secret pact" between Japan and the United States – one that is said to allow U.S. vessels and aircraft carrying nuclear weapons to stop in Japan. This investigation threatens a collision between Tokyo's three nonnuclear principles and the U.S.-Japan alliance relationship that serves as the cornerstone of the U.S. commitment to Japan's defense. While we applaud transparency, the DPJ government needs to be fully aware of the potential

consequences of this investigation if followed through to its logical conclusion.

In December 1967, then Prime Minister Sato Eisaku introduced the "three nonnuclear principles," which pledged that Japan would not possess, manufacture, or allow the introduction of nuclear weapons into Japan. That policy – it was passed as a parliamentary resolution in 1971 and is not a law – reflected Japan's deep-rooted aversion to nuclear weapons and helped Sato win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974. It has been a pillar of Japanese diplomacy and foreign policy ever since – Hatoyama renewed Japan's "firm commitment" to these principles in a speech to the United Nations Security Council just last month.

That pledge notwithstanding, for decades there have been rumors of a secret "don't ask, don't tell" arrangement between Japan and the U.S. that allowed the U.S. to keep nuclear weapons on ships and aircraft that stopped in Japan or transited its waters. Previous Japanese governments denied this deal existed, and it became moot in 1991 when then-President George H.W. Bush ordered the removal of all tactical nuclear weapons from deployed U.S. ships and aircraft. Nonetheless – and here's the rub – the U.S. still follows a strict "neither confirm nor deny" policy in discussing the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons anywhere to avoid precedents that could limit its flexibility or threaten operational security during periods of crisis or conflict or compromise nuclear storage facilities on U.S. territory.

As part of its "transparent government campaign," the DPJ pledged that it would uncover the truth behind the allegations if it won the August parliamentary elections. After taking office, Foreign Minister Okada Katsuya said his office would launch an inquiry and "We will reveal everything we find." Fine; then what? Let's say that the Hatoyama government comes up with "proof" that such a deal existed. What happens next?

Is the Hatoyama government then prepared to announce "case closed" and move on or will it feel compelled to take measures to ensure that this could never happen again – a move that would force Washington to choose between maintaining its "neither confirm nor deny" policy or maintaining the alliance? That might seem like a simple choice to the Japanese but it is not so easy for Washington, which has to always keep one eye on precedents and how this would affect operations and alliances elsewhere.

Facing a similar choice when an anti-nuclear government came to power in New Zealand in 1984, the U.S. chose to let go of its long-standing ANZUS alliance and continue bilaterally with Australia alone. Wellington further complicated the issue by also banning nuclear-powered ships, but it was the "neither confirm nor deny" straw that broke that

camel's back. New Zealand remains outside of ANZUS to this day.

Then there is the “no first use” issue. Prime Minister Hatoyama, in praising President Obama's global disarmament initiative, went further by unilaterally suggesting that Washington also forswear the use of nuclear weapons except in response to a nuclear attack from elsewhere. On the face of it, this “moral highroad” stance would likely enjoy the support of the majority of Japanese (and perhaps even American) citizens. But let's phrase it another way: “Should the U.S. assure North Korea that, in the event of a chemical or biological attack against its Japanese ally, it would not respond using “all available means”? Leaving a potential enemy wondering about the level of response to an act of hostility is aimed at making him think more than twice about starting trouble in the first place.

Please note that refusing to adopt a “no first use” policy does not mean that the U.S. has a “first use” policy or intends to use nuclear weapons preemptively or in response to chemical or biological attacks by North Korea or anyone else. But, for deterrence reasons, it leaves open that possibility. Would Japanese (or American) citizens feel more or less secure if the U.S. limited its options in advance? (Arguing for a “no first use of weapons of mass destruction” policy might make sense, however, but this is another issue and one that should be discussed privately between allies before public pronouncements are made).

Secretary Gates, in discussing the “secret pact” issue with Defense Minister Kitazawa Toshimi, warned that “We hope that care is taken not to have a negative impact on nuclear deterrence and the bilateral relationship.” The same applies to “no first use.”

Gates' mention of the extended deterrent provides context for this entire discussion. Extended deterrence is the cornerstone of the U.S-Japan security treaty, which is in turn the foundation of the two countries' security strategies. It is remarkable to us that the new government in Tokyo would risk threatening that core of the alliance at the very time when conversations in Tokyo reveal growing concern about the credibility of the U.S. commitment to Japan's defense.

Several Japanese interlocutors have even suggested that Japan consider revising the three principles by dropping the one forbidding the introduction of nuclear weapons as a cure for the lack of confidence and to add an extra level of deterrence in the face of North Korea's demonstrated nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities. We are not suggesting that Japan needs to change its three principles – that is a decision for the Japanese alone to make – but the DPJ's demand for transparency has the potential to poison alliance discussions and raise even more doubts about the glue that binds the two alliance partners.

Before the Hatoyama government paints itself into a corner, it needs to think through where it plans to go with its “secret pact” investigation and its support for a “no first use” policy and make clear to the Japanese people – and its U.S. allies – what the desired end result will be. Is Tokyo really prepared to open this potential Pandora's Box? Or is the new government in Tokyo playing a high-stakes game of chicken,

assuming the U.S. will “blink” and continue to defend Japan despite clear indications that U.S. security requires it to maintain opacity when it comes to transporting or using its nuclear weapons? Neither move makes sense to us.

Please note that we are not accusing the Hatoyama government of deliberately trying to undermine or diminish the alliance relationship. The prime minister has made it clear that he sees the Japan-U.S. alliance as “the cornerstone of Japan's foreign policy” and that he wants to “deepen the alliance in a multilayered way from medium and long-term perspectives.” While he has received a lot of criticism about his support for East Asia community building efforts that do not necessarily involve the U.S., he has also made it clear that “priority must be given to the Japan-U.S. alliance.”

But he has also thrown Washington off guard by mentioning that he wants to renegotiate the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that currently protects U.S. forces serving in Japan – it does not place them above the law, but puts limits on jurisdiction based on the offense and whether or not it was committed in the line of duty. SOFA discussions are certainly not off limits; they seem to be perpetual (with South Korea as well as with Japan, with each watching for precedents that the other may set). But vehicles exist for such deliberations. Publicly adding SOFA, host nation support, and other sensitive issues to the list of other contentious issues like the “secret pact” investigation, “no first use,” and Futenma relocation a few weeks before President Obama's first visit to Japan seems aimed more at trying to persuade him not to come than at laying the groundwork for a successful summit.