



The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Beyond the Guidelines

by Mike M. Mochizuki

There has long been a fundamental asymmetry between the attention given the U.S.-Japan security alliance in Japan, and the lack of attention given the issue in the United States. Indeed, there are probably only about 50 people in the United States who really follow the U.S.-Japan security relationship with any level of sophistication. The security relationship and the driving force or policy change, therefore, is basically an elite-driven dynamic. There is very little political participation in the alliance arrangement.

Unknown to most of the American public, or even the U.S. Congress, there has been a lively debate over the last year about the future of the U.S.-Japan security relationship. There are, essentially, five different schools of thought on the issue.

A Secure America

The first of these views could be labeled “Dismantle the Cold War Empire.” The leading proponent of this school of thought is Chalmers Johnson, recently retired from the University of California at San Diego, and now president of the Japan Policy Research Institute. Many analysts associated with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington D.C., also subscribe to this viewpoint.

With the end of the Cold War, according to this school of thought, the United States is a secure country. Although some have argued that rogue states like North Korea are developing intercontinental ballistic missiles, proponents of this view feel that such an assessment is quite exaggerated. And because the United States is so secure in the post-Cold War era, it can afford to disengage militarily from East Asia. Additionally, they argue, the U.S. effort to sustain its Cold War empire may be causing a great deal of resentment in East Asia, and this resentment will eventually undermine American interests.

Therefore, the United States should allow East Asian countries to defend their own security interests, and they can work out, amongst themselves, a stable, balance of power. The United States, they argue, should serve as an offshore balancer – a balancer of last resort.

This school of thought gets a lot of discussion in academic journals like *International Security*, and the media often refers to this point of view. This school of thought is, however, very much a minority view and the possibility that it would drive American policy is practically nil. It makes for great intellectual debate, but political support for this kind of neo-isolationist disengagement strategy is lacking. Furthermore, both Governor Bush and Vice President Gore have reaffirmed America’s commitment to being engaged globally in terms of security.

The Mainstream Views

The next four schools of thought all belong within the mainstream. There are very vocal proponents for each of these views. One striking aspect of the debate is that any one individual may embrace two or more of these viewpoints. It just shows how fluid opinion is among elites about the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Among these four mainstream schools, the first might be called the “Don’t Fix It If It Ain’t Broken” school of thought. According to this view, as the name suggests, the current arrangement works best for the United States. Because Americans have access to bases in Japan and elsewhere, U.S. forces are able to respond in a timely manner to possible security contingencies in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Proponents of this view also argue that the U.S. defense commitment to Japan and other Asian allies reassures the Japanese, and causes them to have a more moderate defense policy. This, in turn, reassures other countries in East Asia, which may harbor concerns about Japan’s strategic intentions and capabilities. As an added bonus, the Japanese have been willing to provide generous host nation support.

This view is the preferred option for many in the United States because it sustains the fundamental asymmetry in the alliance – the United States is in a dominant position and Japan is in a subordinate one. Many of this school of thought tend to be people who see East Asia in straight balance-of-power terms, and they argue that moving from the status quo would upset the delicate balance of power between China and Japan. The most prominent proponents of this school of thought are Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Rising Nationalist Sentiment

I would label the third school of thought “Beware of the Uncapped Bottle.” This viewpoint argues that Japan is now normalizing into a traditional great power, and any effort to try to “keep the cork on the bottle,” or sustain the status quo, is unrealistic.

First, members of this school point to the rise of Japanese nationalism. They contend that it is a broad-based resurgence, with support not only from the nationalist right, but also from the left and the political center. Second, they argue that the Japanese defense establishment, while it embraced the defense cooperation guidelines, is actually seeking defense self-sufficiency. Thus, proponents of this school argue that the United States and Japan have fundamental differences on some big strategic questions.

Proponents of this point of view argue that Japan is indeed rising, which will complicate U.S. strategic thinking, and there is nothing that the United States can do to stop it. America has to adjust to this new situation and it is not going to be easy. I

would not say that this is the predominant view among Japan specialists, but it is not a marginal view either. Many former officials, even former Pentagon officials, make this argument quite forcefully.

The fourth school of thought is one I would call “Three Cheers for Incrementalism.” Proponents of this view argue that one may want to maintain the status quo, but the old U.S.-Japan security relationship is unsustainable. It is an alliance that works well in peace, but is bound to fail during a difficult regional crisis.

The incrementalists, therefore, are in favor of restructuring the U.S.-Japan security relationship to change the terms of the alliance. They further argue that the incremental approach is the best way to push this readjustment of the alliance relationship. Incrementalism, they point out, does not undermine the delicate security consensus that has emerged in Japan. Secondly, this approach does not threaten the rest of the region. Finally, the incrementalists argue that this approach is the most comfortable for Americans, who are, by and large, unsure or ambivalent about what Japan’s security role ought to be. Therefore, the best way to proceed is to test the waters and move very slowly.

The most articulate and effective spokesperson on behalf of the incremental approach is my good friend, Michael Green, at the Council on Foreign Relations. This viewpoint is also the predominant one among American policymakers, both in the U.S. Defense Department and in the U.S. State Department, who manage the U.S.-Japan security relationship.

More Active Participation

The fifth school of thought could be labeled either “Japan Must Do More.” The major proponents of this view are the security specialists who advise Governor George W. Bush. At the very top of that list is Richard Armitage, who was Assistant Secretary for Defense of International Security Affairs in the Reagan administration, and also Dr. Paul Wolfowitz, who was Under Secretary for Policy in the Pentagon during the Bush administration.

Supporters of this view argue that incrementalism is not enough. The defense cooperation guidelines were a good step, but under the guidelines, Japan is still not able to provide active support in the most difficult military missions, when the United States might need Japan’s help most.

Therefore, what Japan and the United States need to do in the next administration is to establish greater jointness at the operational level. Secondly, proponents of this school of thought argue that there is no need to keep the cork on the bottle. Because the United States and Japan share basic values and common security goals, the more Japan does, the better it is for the United States. Finally, they argue that it is only through a stronger alliance that the United States and Japan can work together to face China so that, as it rises, it need not be a destabilizing factor.

Equality and Multilateralization

There are three elements to my own vision of the U.S.-Japan alliance, which I label as “Mike’s Wishful Thinking.” First, what is necessary is a new strategic bargain between the

United States and Japan. It is true that there is broad political support in Japan for the U.S.-Japan alliance, but it is shallow and soft. I am also quite concerned that the United States continues to press very hard on sustaining the high level of host nation support. Every time America pushes, I see more and more irritation from Japan.

Finally, I take very seriously the Japanese aspiration to develop an independent foreign policy. It is not about strategic independence from the United States, but about independent thought in Japan on what its national interests are and about the pursuit of those interests on more equal terms with the United States.

To help solve this problem, the United States should accept Japan as an equal partner and should welcome constitutional revision as Japan begins to play a role in some of the more difficult military missions. The United States should also be willing to reduce its military presence in Japan, especially in Okinawa, as long as Japan is willing to embrace the right to collective self defense, and acquires the will and capability to help power projection by the United States during a period of crisis.

The second pillar of my “Wishful Thinking,” is to multilateralize the U.S. alliance network – to really conclude the unfinished business of the Cold War era. Today, there are fewer compelling reasons to stick to bilateralism, as the United States has done, and more compelling reasons to multilateralize.

The United States needs to foster closer ties, not only with respective allies, but also between U.S. allies. This has already begun to happen in the Japan-Republic of Korea relationship. There should also be greater security ties between Japan and the Philippines, and Japan and Australia. Furthermore, multilateralization of the U.S. alliance network is probably the best way to constrain China as China’s military capability increases.

Finally, the United States should also try to create an inclusive regional security community based on the concept of cooperative security. If military forces work together on joint missions, it increases transparency and trust. Even if there are major conflicts of interest, there is enough trust that those crises can be managed without the use of military means.

I support the creation of a North Pacific security dialogue as a complement to the ASEAN regional forum, and it would include the following countries: the four major powers – the United States, Japan, China, and Russia – the two Koreas, Canada, and Mongolia. In such a forum, I would promote greater collaboration among the military establishments of the member countries in dealing with common problems such as search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and protection against piracy.

Bringing in Canada and Mongolia makes it not only less of a Korea forum, but also less of a major power forum. Having the Canadians, in particular, as part of this process, is an excellent way of focusing on the development of values and norms rather than trying to establish an order that entails great power dominance.

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