



U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee: an assessment by Yuki Tatsumi

On Feb. 19, the U.S. secretaries of State and Defense met with their Japanese counterparts in Washington, DC at the Security Consultative Committee (more commonly known as the “2+2 meeting”). The joint statement released after the meeting applauds the cooperation between the two countries, reaffirms the significance of the U.S.-Japan security relationship to the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, and articulates a set of common strategic goals for the alliance. The joint declaration also notes Japan’s efforts to take a more active role in international security affairs.

Few disagree with the significance of this joint statement. The contrast between it and the one issued at the end of the last 2+2 meeting in December 2002 is clear. While the 2002 joint statement merely took note of U.S.-Japan cooperation in the war on terrorism and provided a checklist of security issues that require cooperation between Tokyo and Washington, the 2005 statement sets the future direction of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

It is also noteworthy that the joint statement includes common strategic objectives that have not been explicitly discussed within the alliance framework in the past. The inclusion of Taiwan and China-related issues is particularly interesting. The normalization of Japan-Russia relations (with the resolution of the Northern Territories issue as a requisite) was also named for the first time as a common strategic goal for the U.S.-Japan alliance. The joint statement also called for a comprehensive discussion of the division of roles and missions between Japan and the United States, including the realignment of U.S. Forces in Japan. While the statement says this should occur in an expeditious manner, it did not set a specific deadline.

What do these developments all mean? First and foremost, they show that the U.S.-Japan alliance continues to evolve. The joint statement celebrated the maturity that the alliance has achieved since the end of the Cold War and signals that Tokyo and Washington will work to ensure that their bilateral alliance adjusts to changes in the international security environment. Further, it not only clarified what was set forth in the 1996 Tokyo Declaration, but also went a step further – declaring that the U.S.-Japan alliance is on the path to become a global strategic partnership that reaches well beyond the Asia-Pacific region.

Second, the joint statement is an effort by both governments to “lock in” the progress that has been made within the alliance to date. Observers of the U.S.-Japan security relationship are keenly aware that much of Japan’s recent security policy changes would not have been possible without Prime Minister’s Koizumi’s leadership. With the end

of Koizumi’s term approaching, both sides need prepare for his departure. Washington and Tokyo have laid the foundation from which Koizumi’s successor will have to operate – preventing a potential regression of Japanese security policy following Koizumi’s departure.

Third, the joint statement signals that Tokyo is consolidating its national security policy priorities around the U.S.-Japan alliance. Unlike the revised 1997 U.S.-Japan Guidelines, Japan did not try to skirt the issue of Taiwan and was willing to articulate security concerns vis-à-vis China both directly (highlighting China’s military activities) and indirectly (note the reference to “destabilizing sales and transfers of arms and military technology”). Japan appears less hesitant to more closely align itself with Washington on these issues. Efforts within Japan over the past year to articulate its national security strategy, including the final report from the Council on Defense and National Security (or Araki Commission) and the revision of the National Defense Program Guidelines, were contributing factors.

Overall, the statement seems to confirm that the relationship between Washington and Tokyo has never been better. Some in the U.S. have talked about “Japan surpassing,” applauding Japan for exceeding the expectations of the United States. Down the road, however, many challenges remain.

Some of the challenges will be external. For instance, coping with China, which often perceives moves by the U.S.-Japan alliance as a threat to its sovereignty, will be strenuous. A former senior U.S. government official recently noted that the joint statement could complicate the alliance’s short-term relations with China. Indeed, China has already taken issue with the reference to Taiwan, claiming that it represents an “interference in internal affairs.” The Chinese media has argued that the statement is intended to contain China and is an excuse for the military expansion of the U.S.-Japan alliance. China may have overreacted, but it is unclear how Japan and the U.S. can build a “cooperative relationship” with an increasingly powerful, yet suspicious China.

The real challenge is whether Tokyo can overcome internal political hurdles to continue developing its national security strategy. Negotiations over the realignment of U.S. Forces in Japan is the first real test. The two governments so far have failed to finish implementation of the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) process, which is meant to reduce the burden of U.S. bases on Okinawa. The process has been bogged down by complex political factors, including difficult negotiations between central and local authorities. A more comprehensive realignment of U.S. forces across Japan that involves several prefectures – some of which have powerful and vocal governors such as Tokyo’s Ishihara Shintaro – will be even more politically taxing for Tokyo. Since progress on this issue is expected to come sooner than

with other issues, Washington will use it as a test of Tokyo's intentions. And it is doubtful that Koizumi, who is expected to be consumed for the remainder of his term with the privatization of the postal system and with pension reform, is willing to spend the political capital required for the successful conclusion of these bilateral consultations.

The joint Security Consultative Committee statement sets ambitious goals for the U.S.-Japan alliance. However, the devil is always in the details. Over the months and years to come, Tokyo must be ready to show political courage to uphold its end of the bargain and honor the spirit of the joint declaration. Washington must reciprocate by showing patience and sensitivity to political dynamics within Japan.

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[Senior editor's comment: Many commentaries on the 2+2 meeting, including this one, make reference to the inclusion of Taiwan and China-related issues in the joint declaration. Without disputing the significance, it is important to recognize

what was actually said (and not said). One common strategic objective was to "encourage the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue." Another was to "encourage China to improve transparency of its military affairs." Both were preceded by the objective to "develop a cooperative relationship with China." This hardly constitutes "a demonstration of Japan's willingness to confront the rapidly growing might of China," as a pre-release Washington Post analysis of an early version of the text proclaimed. This premature (not to mention inaccurate) reporting has caused both misinterpretation and over-reaction, with Beijing objecting to another alleged "interference in its internal affairs" and Taipei euphorically applauding the "fact" that "Japan has become more assertive." R. Cossa]

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