



The Defense Policy Review Initiative: a reflection
by Yuki Tatsumi

At the end of 2002, the United States and Japan launched an ambitious initiative to transform the U.S.-Japan alliance. Officially called the Defense Policy Review Initiative (DPRI), the talks aimed at figuring out how to adapt the U.S.-Japan alliance to the security environment in the 21st century when the nature of threats has changed dramatically. With the agreement over the weekend regarding payment for the relocation of U.S. Marines to Guam, it looks like the DPRI will finally come to a conclusion. The two governments will likely announce agreement on the realignment of U.S. forces in Japan at the next Security Consultative Committee meeting, which is expected to be held soon. But the “success” of the DPRI may prove illusory.

The circumstances under which the DPRI began seemed to promise good results. The terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 provided an imperative on the part of the United States to adjust its alliances to meet new security challenges. Sept. 11 also created a political environment in Japan in which security issues could be discussed more openly. Japan was led by Koizumi Junichiro, a prime minister who was overwhelmingly popular, adept at communicating his policy goals to the public, and instinctively inclined to strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance. The two countries’ leaders enjoyed a genuinely close personal relationship, which was supported by a group of officials who valued the alliance and were dedicated to sustaining and strengthening it. If difficult decisions needed to be made about the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the DPRI would have been the opportunity to address them. The DPRI could have been a springboard from which the two countries made their partnership truly global.

The DPRI did not go as hoped, however. Despite rhetoric that the U.S.-Japan alliance has never been better, the DPRI came to the verge of collapse several times over the past three years. Each time, it took political intervention at a very senior level to save it. In particular, the base realignment process has been a painful process for both countries.

There are several explanations for the slow progress of the DPRI. No significant political figure in Japan has championed the DPRI in the way that Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro did for U.S. force realignment in Okinawa in the mid-1990s. Even Prime Minister Koizumi’s interest in this issue has been sporadic at best. Japan also scores poorly on interagency coordination and its attitudes toward the negotiations. The Japan Defense Agency (JDA) often neglected to consult with the Defense Facilities Administration Agency, the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Treasury, and relevant offices in the Cabinet Affairs Office. The lack of notification to affected local governments slowed progress in the JDA’s efforts to convince them to accept the force realignment plan that was

agreed between Tokyo and Washington in October 2005. A string of leaks to the Japanese media on the negotiation generated resentment and mistrust among U.S. officials, fueling their frustration. Most importantly, stubbornness on both sides created a sense of “us” vs. “them,” often overshadowing the ultimate purpose of the negotiation – to strengthen the bilateral alliance.

The U.S. side was not without problems. The preoccupation with other security challenges, such as Iraq, North Korea, and Iran left Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Richard Lawless with virtually the entire burden of concluding an agreement with the Japanese government. Most senior officials in other U.S. agencies who could have been helpful in facilitating a successful conclusion of the DPRI have left the government and their successors do not have a similar level of interest and expertise. Today, the U.S. negotiation team, primarily consisting of Defense officials, is overworked and frustrated with little interagency support to buttress its effort.

Such observations aside, the DPRI suggests a more fundamental problem in the U.S.-Japan alliance. Simply put, there is a gap between Tokyo and Washington in their perceptions and expectations of each other. U.S. negotiators were encouraged by developments in Japan in the immediate aftermath of Sept. 11, including its decision to send Maritime Self-Defense Force vessels to the Indian Ocean and Ground Self-Defense Force troops to Iraq. Other developments – the Council on Security and Defense Capabilities Report, the enactment of contingency legislation, the decision to introduce ballistic missile defense, and the revision of National Defense Program Guidelines – encouraged U.S. officials to believe that Japan was ready and willing to fundamentally change its security policy, and rapidly expand its role within the U.S.-Japan alliance and beyond.

That expectation was “betrayed” in the DPRI. To be sure, Sept. 11 created momentum for Japan to take ad hoc measures, as demonstrated by the passage of two special measures laws to support U.S.-led coalition efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Sept. 11 also created enough political support to create a basic framework that guides Tokyo if Japan faces clear and present security threats.

But the steps often identified as the sign of fundamental changes in Japan took place *without* any change to the existing constitutional framework. At the end of the day, Japan still chooses not to exercise its right of collective self-defense. The Self-Defense Forces (SDF) cannot operate overseas without the government-imposed and often unrealistic restrictions on its area of operations and rules of engagement, which practically rules out any meaningful contribution to efforts by multinational coalition forces. The political context – which prohibits the SDF from being dispatched to high-risk areas – remains unchanged. Constitutional reform, which was often

thought to be ready to move forward, has essentially stalled. In short, all the legal and political constraints that existed at the end of the Cold War remain.

As a result, exchanges between the two governments in the DPRI remained largely unchanged: Washington requests (or demands) changes and Japan drags its feet in response. This is hardly an exchange between two mature allies, and is met with great frustration in Washington. Japan's behavior begs the question: Are Japanese government statements about its willingness to change and become a proactive partner in the U.S.-Japan alliance genuine? Or, more troubling still, do the U.S. and Japan really share a common vision for their alliance

The realignment plans will be announced with much fanfare, and celebrated as another step forward in the transformation of the alliance. But the frustration and animosity that emerged during the negotiations may linger. In fact, as both sides enter an even more difficult phase of implementing the force realignment plan, resentment can easily resurface. If Japan can execute the realignment plan without using political calendar-based excuses to delay the process, it would go a long way to restore the confidence that was lost during the DPRI. But that alone is not enough.

The DPRI challenged the assumption that the U.S. and Japan share a vision and goals for the future of their alliance. If the two governments are serious about transforming the U.S.-Japan alliance into a global strategic partnership, they must find ways to identify the gaps in perception and expectation and address them in an honest yet constructive manner. In the absence of such efforts, the U.S.-Japan alliance may enter another period of drift.

Yuki Tatsumi (ytatsumi@stimson.org) is a Research Fellow at the East Asia Program at the Henry L. Stimson Center.

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