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Korea-Japan Cooperation Can Stabilize and Balance the Alliances with the U.S. by Shinobu Miyachi

On August 4 and 5, 1999, the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) and the Korean Navy held their first-ever joint exercises, heralding a new era for Korea-Japan security cooperation. The joint exercises – which introduced the Korean Navy to a receptive Japanese public – began on August 2 with two Korean warships and 3 JMSDF destroyers training together in Pusan. Until recently, joint exercises with Japan would have been loudly protested, but the fact that there was little comment pro or con in Korea may be the calm that comes with changing winds. Such cooperation not only serves to boost Korea-Japan relations – it also will play an important role in legitimizing a continued American presence in Northeast Asia.

American forces are essential for the stability of Asia, but their presence in Japan continually irritates certain subconscious nationalistic feelings. The fighting capacity of American forces is in a class by itself and would be extremely difficult to equal, but to that very extent, a sense of subservience lingers. Mayor of Tokyo Shintaro Ishihara's call for the return or joint use of the U.S. Air Force base in Yokota, and grassroots demands for the relocation of the U.S. Marine base at Futenma are manifestations of these feelings.

This contradiction could be resolved by a counterweight to the American military presence in the public consciousness. As Korean-Japanese activities increase and the military presence of allies other than the U.S. becomes a familiar sight to the Japanese public, the "occupation image" of the U.S. forces in Japan might be diluted. The 2000-year history of Japan and Korea is one of continual interaction among each nation's people. If they can now deepen their mutual security relationship, their alliance will grow stronger and facilitate a continued presence of American forces in Northeast Asia. And as the situation on the Korean peninsula grows increasingly more precarious, such a presence may be more important than ever.

The year from summer 1998 to spring 1999 was one in which the Japanese were reminded forcefully of the tension on the Korean Peninsula. The test firing of a Taepodong missile in August, 1998, which flew over northeastern Japan; the sinking of a North Korean mini-submarine by a South Korean destroyer in December, 1998; and the invasion by North Korean spy ships in March, 1999, which resulted in the Japanese government issuing for the first time a Maritime Security Action (a preparatory military action) and the firing of warning shots by the JMSDF; all shocked the Japanese people and raised the clear possibility of a spark between North and South Korea igniting a fire in Japanese territory.

These events inspired a series of actions by the Japanese government. Out of concern over the Taepodong missile

firing, the government is participating in the U.S.-Japan joint development of TMD and has decided to launch its own intelligence-gathering satellite. The invasion of the spy ship has generated a consensus among the Japanese people in favor of strengthening territorial patrols. Despite these steps, Japan's official national security policy since W.W.II has been "extreme caution with regard to the use of military force," and the "pacifist" ideology of Japan's constitution continues to be deeply rooted in the people.

But what are Japan's strategic objectives, given its extreme caution? Until the end of the Cold War in 1989, Japan pursued, within the framework of the U.S.-USSR conflict, a strategy of containing the Soviets in the Far East. With the end of the Cold War, new objectives arose. Japan has begun to strike a new balance between its "extreme caution in the use of military force" and its "contribution to international order," from which it has received enormous economic benefit. It has taken steps toward the "contribution to international order," but should it contribute through international alliances or under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty?

In the UN versus U.S. debate, Japan selected the more realistic alternative: the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. The new National Defense Program Outline (NDPO), a Cabinet decision made in November 1995, made U.S.-Japan cooperation even clearer. Previously, room to maneuver independently was implicit in the provision that, "Japan shall independently respond to limited, small-scale invasions." This "independent response" clause was removed from the new defense program, however. The entire process of Japanese defense is now clearly described as a joint operation involving both the U.S. and Japan.

The new Guidelines leave even actions on the Korean Peninsula up to the results of U.S.-Japan discussions. Japan has not promised absolutely to participate, but realistically, Japan could not sit idly by and watch a second Korea War. If Japan were to shy away from the threat from North Korean nuclear missiles and refuse to provide logistical support to U.S. forces, the U.S. would find itself in an extremely difficult situation trying to support any action in Korea, even the sort of air attacks that characterized the Kosovo conflict. Conversely, to handle refugees from the Korean Peninsula, or a retreat by Japanese or Americans, the cooperation of Japan would be indispensable. For South Korea, a national defense plan that does not include cooperation from Japan would be an illusion, essentially eliminating support from U.S. forces based in Japan.

The Japanese people will, of course, stand up to defend South Korea. However, given the extent to which the principle of "extreme caution in the use of military force" has seeped into public consciousness, it is not clear whether Japan

could today take even the action it took 50 years ago. The new Guidelines stipulate logistical support in rear areas with no possibility of actual combat. Under present circumstances and consistent with previous interpretations of the constitution, Japan would not be able to use military force unless North Korea directly attacked Japan.

The odd thing about the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty is that Japan provides bases to American forces “for the peace and stability of the Far East,” and in return the American forces have joint responsibility for Japan’s defense. Meanwhile, Japan is under no obligation to provide even logistical support, much less actually fight to help the U.S., except in the defense of Japan. This is quite different from the U.S.-Korea Treaty, in which both sides promise to defend each other in the Pacific Region. If a second Korean War were to occur, in addition to providing logistical support for sorties by U.S. forces, Japan would be limited to quietly approving the temporary use of territory by Korean planes or ships, attacking North Korean forces that enter Japan’s territory pursuing American forces, and providing the American military with a “safe haven.”

The U.S. has a tendency to force its way on others to serve its own interests or values, but for the security of Japan, Korea, and indeed all of Asia, there is great significance in the positive development of that military power. Half a century after W.W.II, the presence of U.S. troops in Japan is widely accepted by the Japanese people as having maintained the stability of Asia. However, accepting this fact logically does not entirely remove latent emotional resistance to the presence of a foreign army...

To eliminate this sort of instability and allow the U.S. forces to develop positively, we must remake the image of the American forces. Their presence cannot be seen as a convenience for a single country, but rather it must be cast in the light of bringing stability to the international order, from which Japan benefits greatly. Cooperation between Japan and Korea for this purpose makes the presence of American troops easier to understand and accept. If South Korean troops were routinely visible to the Japanese public, the relationship of U.S. forces to Japanese forces would shift to a three-way relationship. The presence of the U.S. forces would then be diluted, and the logic of cooperating for the stabilization of Asia would be complemented by an actual change in the sentiment of the Japanese people.

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