



## 2+2 MEETING HITS (ALMOST) ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

BY BRAD GLOSSREMAN

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Whatever the strains in the US-Japan overall relationship – and they appear to be growing as trade talks pick up speed – the alliance remains strong. That is the unmistakable message from the Security Consultative Committee (SCC or “2+2”) meeting of each country’s secretaries of state and defense, held earlier this month in Washington. The [joint declaration](#) released at its conclusion affirms longstanding pillars of the alliance and breaks new ground in two areas. Implementation will, as always, be a challenge, particularly when it comes to base realignment in Okinawa. Nonetheless, at a time when US commitments are increasingly subject to challenge, the SCC message is clear and reassuring.

Four elements of this year’s SCC declaration should be highlighted. The first is “alliance boilerplate” – ideas and issues that constitute the essence of the US-Japan security partnership. Start with the foundational principle that the alliance is “the cornerstone of peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region”; there is no retreat from the centrality of this partnership to the region and the world. From that follows the assertion that US extended deterrence is critical to the security of Japan as well as regional stability. The declaration affirms, as did the previous SCC statement, the US commitment to defend Japan with all means, including its nuclear capabilities. Related to that position is reaffirmation that Article 5 of the mutual security treaty, which obliges the US to

come to Japan’s defense, applies to the Senkaku Islands. This statement follows the SCC’s “concern about, and strong opposition to, unilateral coercive attempts to alter the status quo in the East China Sea and South China Sea.”

Both governments also voiced a commitment to North Korea’s abandonment of its nuclear and missile capabilities “in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner in accordance with relevant UN Security Council resolutions.” The [previous SCC statement](#) (from 2017) applauded multilateral security and defense cooperation with regional partners; this year, the declaration went further and acknowledged the “need for an increasingly networked structure of alliances and partnerships, anchored by the U.S.-Japan Alliance” to counter regional challenges.

A second notable component of the SCC statement concerns the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Here, the Trump administration puts its stamp on the SCC. The previous SCC declaration referred to “Japan’s free and open Indo-Pacific strategy.” This year, the ministers voiced their “strong commitment to realize a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific,’ a shared vision for a region in which all nations are sovereign, strong, and prosperous.” What was once Japan’s is now shared. Both governments now embrace the FOIP framework, an alignment of visions and rhetoric that shows alliance adaption. This thinking is also evident in the three mentions of “rules” in the declaration: The two governments understand their partnership is engaged in the task of both writing and underwriting a regional order, not merely providing muscle as in the past.

The third distinctive component of this year’s SCC statement, and perhaps the most striking, concerns cybersecurity. The “ministers highlighted space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum as priority areas to better prepare the Alliance for cross-domain operations.” This language tracks almost exactly that of Japan’s most recent [National Defense Program Guidelines](#), released late last year, which sets Ministry of Defense policy and priorities.

In contrast to the 2017 SCC statement, which said that the two governments would engage in “consultations on serious cyber issues,” this year “the Ministers recognized that malicious cyber activity presents an

increasing threat to the security and prosperity of both the US and Japan ... [and] committed to enhance cooperation on cyber issues, including deterrence and response capabilities...” Crucially, they “affirmed that international law applies in cyberspace and that a cyber attack could, in certain circumstances, constitute an armed attack for the purposes of Article V of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.”

Tokyo had reportedly been pressing Washington to make this commitment, which, like any other invocation of Article 5, is not automatic but will be made on a case-by-case basis after consultations. It aligns the cybersecurity dimension of the US-Japan alliance with that of NATO, which has since 2014 recognized that a cyberattack could constitute an “armed attack” under article 5 of that treaty as well.

While this is a welcome development – any alliance adaption to emerging contingencies and threats is to be applauded – it could prove problematic. The two governments established a US-Japan Cyber Defense Policy Working Group in 2013 and have prioritized information sharing and protection of the critical information on which the two militaries rely. But their capabilities to do so are strikingly different. It is [estimated](#) that the US has some 6,000 personnel defending the country from cyberattacks; the SDF cyber defense team consists of just 150 people (set to expand to 220 by the end of the 2020 fiscal year).

Then there are legal constraints on Japan’s cyber operations. The US has embraced the concept of “defend forward” in its [Cyber Strategy](#), a posture with two dimensions pertinent to this discussion. First, the US will “conduct cyberspace operations to collect intelligence and prepare military cyber capabilities to be used in the event of crisis or conflict.” In other words, actions such as surveilling systems or planting malware will be taken *prior* to hostilities. Second, these operations will occur in non-US networks to “stop threats before they reach their targets.” Or, as the strategy explains, defend forward aims “to disrupt or halt malicious cyber activity *at its source*...” [Emphasis added in both quotes.] In terms of time and space, actions will be taken which, while defensive in nature, are indistinguishable from offensive operations.

Leave aside, for now, the risks attendant to this posture. Penetrating enemy systems in anticipation of an attack may not be legal for Japanese cyber defenders. Indeed, the Japanese Diet has yet to give a definitive answer on what is considered constitutional with regard to cyber offensive operations. It is hard to see how Japan can get around this restriction.

These two constraints – personnel and legal – assume special significance when the SCC statement, along with every other alliance document, “emphasized that each nation is responsible for developing the relevant capabilities to protect their national networks and critical infrastructure.” Joint defense and alliance burden sharing in cyber are difficult, if not imperiled, by Japan’s shortcomings.

The fourth notable element of the SCC statement is, sadly, a longstanding problem that is getting no closer to resolution with the passage of time: Okinawa. The ministers reaffirmed their governments’ commitment to implement the realignment of US forces in Japan. That process has proceeded well except in Okinawa, where the Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF) continues to be a local political fault line. Resistance remains high and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been defeated in a series of local elections that have focused on base relocation in which opponents of the FRF move prevailed. Adding to those tensions is a recent case in which a US Navy sailor allegedly stabbed to death a Japanese woman and then committed suicide. Okinawa seems destined to remain a perplexing and frustrating challenge for alliance planners.

Fortunately, there is more to the alliance than Okinawa. The two nations’ leadership and security bureaucracies understand the challenges they confront and this SCC declaration makes clear that “they get it.” It is an important affirmation of our shared purpose as trade negotiators in each country begin to work on a bilateral trade agreement that will surely test the larger partnership.

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