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IT'S NOT ABOUT STUFF: WHY US-JAPAN DEFENSE COOPERATION WILL GROW

BY JOHN WRIGHT

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In this time of political uncertainty in both nations, we must remember that US-Japan defense cooperation is not all about stuff and money; it is about the strategic nature of the partnership—a pair of like-minded nations pooling resources to secure mutual national interests.

First, it is important to remember Japan is a sovereign nation with full control over its defense procurement. The cancellation of Japan's Aegis Ashore acquisition last month, and the rumored cancellation of Japan's RQ-4B Global Hawk acquisition, are reminders that Japan cannot be relied upon to buy shiny new equipment at high prices all the time. Defense procurement in its current form is destined for reform for two reasons: because the current US-Japan defense acquisition process is unsustainable, and the energy used to negotiate, select, buy, build, and deliver weapons from abroad can be put to better use elsewhere.

Timely defense procurement continues to be stymied by three main issues: Japan's trading house system, which facilitates defense procurements and adds an extra step in the process, creating an additional layer of cost; the pace of technological advancement during contract fulfillment, which often increases costs; and the firm fixed pricing model often used for defense contracts. Together with Japan's economic realities, these three factors will complicate and undermine a defense contract or two. This does not mean that US defense sales to Japan will end; the US is still the best source of high-tech equipment available to Japan, and its long defense procurement partnership gives Japan an edge on early availability compared to other nations. After all, Japan was one of the first US international partners to receive the F-35 fighter, getting it even earlier than the US Air Force.

Second, the changing strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific will increase demand for defense cooperation. In a timely interview last week, political scientist John Mearsheimer noted that Japan is going to have to spend much more on defense and work closer with the US given the changing regional balance of power. This will involve developing new defense capabilities, and one such capability could be procuring the ability to attack enemy bases via land-based missiles stationed in Japan, purported to be under discussion by the Japanese government. This discussion must be treated seriously because it is a natural response to the pressures on Japan resulting from security competition in the Indo-Pacific. Such a program would yield very close cooperation with the US, which possesses a great deal of experience with missile systems and the requisite targeting know-how to use them.

Third, resources that are not spent buying a weapon system are not lost from defense forever. If Japan re-assigns time and money it would have spent on a defense program to another defense asset which could be used bilaterally, like its future fighter or the Space Operations Squadron launched in June, then US-Japan defense cooperation is advanced. Defense spending in the face of evolving threats often requires out-of-the-box thinking and a healthy dose of reform; the Indo-Pacific demands this.

Fourth, Japan's economy requires policymakers to squeeze every bit of value out of every yen, and few things are more expensive than weapons. The

demographic triple-disaster facing Japan—a dwindling worker population, a declining birthrate, and a rising elderly demographic—will worsen. Future occupants of the *Kantei* will face difficult decisions about what kind and what levels of social programs Japan will need. The resulting security pressures will require a closer US-Japan defense cooperation, not a looser one.

Fifth, the roles played by both the US and Japan within the security pact continue to evolve. As encroachments upon Japanese territory both in the air and on the sea grow bolder, the oft-cited "spear and shield" description of the US-Japan Alliance looks less and less sustainable. While the US will defend Japan come what may, Japan must continue to conduct more and varied defense roles on its own as its role in the alliance continues to evolve. Japan's recent stand-up of the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade in Naha and establishment of military posts on several islands in the Southwest Island chain are proof of a slow-but-steady approach to this evolution. This latter point is critical in the mostly ocean Indo-Pacific where aircraft carriers—the power projection method most traditionally favored by the United States—are finding themselves more and more in the gunsights of relatively cheap (compared to the cost of a carrier) anti-carrier weapons which will only proliferate more over time.

Japan's Self Defense Forces are evolving as well. Japan's recent announcement to raise the recruitment target of the Japan Maritime Self Defense Forces by two thousand in order to crew anti-missile destroyers is, while a very modest change, a sign that Japan is taking incremental action to face changing regional defense realities. Additionally, beginning with this year's typhoon season the central government has limited the ability of local governments to use Self Defense Force personnel as "free labor" during disaster cleanup so that they can better focus on their main mission—national defense. While much more needs to be done—improving financial and facility support for Japan Self Defense Force members' and their families is a great need, for example—these are welcome changes.

Sixth, Japan must still tread lightly concerning US-Japan defense arrangements. Despite the recent cancellation of the Aegis Ashore program and the occasional characterizations of Japan Defense Minister Kono as "rogue," Japan actually has very little political wiggle room to begin flipping over tables and burning defense contracts. The Futenma Realignment Facility continues to see slow forward progress, and the US is not eager to be solely blamed for this by future Japanese governments under domestic political pressure. While much has been made of Japan's potential acceptance into the "Five Eyes" military intelligence club, such a move will require Japan to satisfy its current members before it could join. While it may only be a matter of time before the kinks are worked out between the "Five Eyes" group and Japan, until that time Japan must play its political cards right in order to gain acceptance. Additionally, a changing political party in the United States could mean closer economic cooperation; a future US government as a member of the currently Japan-led successor to the Trans-Pacific Partnership is not out of the question and would be a significant boon to economic trade and regional security.

It is clear Japan's security realities have not disappeared, and the threats it faces every day do not grow weaker after cancelling a major defense procurement. However, there is much more to a defense partnership than one or two contracts, and maintaining an alliance takes hard work from daily interaction between seasoned interlocutors on all levels and between all agencies. In the end, the strategic nature of Indo-Pacific security competition will shape the decisions of both the United States and Japan and will contribute to a closer cooperative relationship, even though a few contracts may go sour.