

The Current State of U.S.-Japan Strategic Dialogue: A Strategic Pause, or an Opportunity Slipping Away?

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The U.S.-Japan security relationship has reached an important cross-road this fall, and the next six months could either turn out to be one of the more significant turning points in the history of this alliance, or it could simply mark the completion of a more limited discussion that began ten years ago.

Before the surprise House of Representatives election last month interrupted Japan's political and diplomatic calendar, American and Japanese officials were preparing to release an interim report on various adjustments to the way the alliance operates, including the potential for modestly realigning the U.S. military presence in Japan. Many expected this interim report to be presented at a late September summit meeting between President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, but the summit meeting was postponed due to the election. The nearness of that interim report deadline, however, is not a good indication of the degree to which the two countries had developed a consensus regarding how best to transform their alliance, as important differences remained.

Now, after Koizumi's and the LDP's convincing election win, the key questions for the alliance are whether or not the two governments can regain momentum after postal reform is addressed, as well as how substantive an "alliance transformation" can they negotiate. The bilateral consultations got off to a good start, but lately the two sides have been drifting apart with regard to priorities and the willingness to make bold changes to their security relationship. It will take strong political leadership, especially in Japan, to help forge a consensus and strengthen the alliance for the twenty-first century. Failure to move forward would result in a missed opportunity, and it could be detrimental to peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region.

A New Ending or a New Beginning?

These alliance transformation talks [or strategic dialogue] officially got started in late 2002, at a meeting of the two countries' Foreign and Defense ministers (the so-called 2+2 meeting), but they did not become intense until the fall of 2004. It was at that time that the initial phase of the U.S.-South Korea talks was coming to a conclusion, symbolized in October by a signing of agreements to reduce and relocate the U.S. Forces Korea headquarters and other bases from around Seoul to locations farther south. The Japanese government was also putting the finishing touches on a blueprint for future development of its defense infrastructure, called the National Defense Program Guideline, FY 2005-.

By November 2004, defense and foreign ministry officials from both countries understood that it was time to talk in more detail about how the alliance was going to adapt to some of the

The Current State of U.S.-Japan Strategic Dialogue: A Strategic Pause, or an Opportunity Slipping Away?

changes taking place within each country and around the region. At the time, it was envisioned that the allies would develop and articulate a set of common strategic objectives, from which they could then discuss the appropriate delegation of roles and missions for their forces, followed by a conversation about the operational requirements in support of those missions. It was a very logical and well-intentioned approach.

The strategic dialogue proceeded relatively smoothly at first, culminating in the announcement of a set of common strategic objectives at the conclusion of a 2+2 meeting on February 19, 2005. The press generally highlighted the fact that encouraging “the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue” was an explicit common objective of the two allies. While this statement certainly does have some significance (especially to China), most observers recognize that this objective is a matter of course, for both economic and national security reasons that are important to Japan and the United States. What was more important about the February announcement was the overall picture that it provides regarding the underlying purpose of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Ultimately, the joint statement seeks to explain why the alliance has value in a regional and a global perspective, and for that reason it is worth reviewing.¹

In short, the February joint statement acts like a bridge between the two countries’ overarching security planning documents, the aforementioned NDPG in Japan and America’s National Security Strategy. To some extent, the allies already had this conversation ten years earlier, when they prepared the Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security in 1996, the last time Japan’s NDPG review process coincided with a U.S. National Security Strategy Report. While some of the conclusions made in February 2005 are consistent with those made ten years ago, the fact is that the two countries have changed since the mid 1990s, and the regional and global security environments have changed as well.

From an American perspective, the most significant change is the fact that America and its allies are in the midst of a multi-front war against an enemy that thrives in despotic or failed-state situations. Despite the controversial war in Iraq, overall the democratic and free market nations of the world have been united in their battle against terrorist networks and the conditions that allow them to operate, not only in the Middle East, but also in the Philippines, Indonesia, and other parts of Asia.

Japan has been a partner in this effort, recognizing that its own national interests are involved, and U.S. officials have taken note. Judging from Japan’s contributions in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, the reconstruction effort in Iraq, and the Proliferation Security Initiative, among other contributions, U.S. officials had high expectations that this round of bilateral consultations would result in an even more sophisticated and integrated security relationship, compared to before. After all, Japan stated in its NDPG that “the peace and stability of Japan is inextricably linked to that of the international community,” and that “Japan will, on its own initiative, actively participate in

¹ See “Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee,” U.S. Department of State website at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/4290.htm>, February 19, 2005.

The Current State of U.S.-Japan Strategic Dialogue: A Strategic Pause, or an Opportunity Slipping Away?

international peace cooperation activities.” U.S. officials understood that Japan might not always require a UN mandate to join other nations in helping struggling democracies like Afghanistan or to help stop piracy or illicit trade.

The 2005 joint statement, like the joint declaration of 1996, recognizes that there are traditional (or “persistent”) threats in the Asia-Pacific region, presumably a nuclear North Korea or a potential conflict involving China, and it also acknowledges “new threats,” such as international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their means of delivery. It then outlines the tangible objectives of ensuring the security of Japan and working to prevent terrorism and the proliferation of WMD. In addition, the 2005 joint statement newly indicates the common objectives of maintaining stable maritime traffic and the global energy supply.

The success of the strategic dialogue and Japan’s recent actions suggested that the DPRI talks were a new beginning for a more equal security relationship, and that Japan was looking to become a partner in a wider range of non-offensive military activities. When the DPRI talks turned from strategic objectives to roles and missions after February, however, it seemed to the Americans that the Japanese team was not of one mind. Some Japanese did see the chance for a new beginning, but others saw it as a way to finally conclude the agreements made a decade earlier, particularly with respect to the relocation of Futenma. They understood the American hype about military transformation as a way to close or consolidate U.S. bases in Japan, while still feeling protected by America’s long-range strike capabilities based in Guam, Hawaii, or the U.S. mainland.

The lack of clarity or sense of purpose was all the more evident when operational arrangements were discussed, because certain adjustments will require difficult political decisions to be made in Tokyo (and in the communities that host U.S.-run military facilities). After all, achieving some of the above-mentioned strategic objectives requires specific military capabilities, and this means that the right equipment and personnel (with the proper training) must be prepared to respond if the common objectives are threatened. Technology can compensate for some reduction of U.S. equipment, personnel, and training in Japan, but not all. Is Japan ready to fulfill all the roles of reconnaissance, deterrence, rapid response, multilateral training, refueling, etc. that the United States currently contributes? Such a transfer of missions takes time and planning. The recently agreed transfer of ten U.S. missions to Korean forces, for example, will take several years to fully complete.

Peacetime versus Wartime; Horizontal or Vertical?

Nor is it enough to say that the United States and Japan can create a peacetime versus wartime arrangement, whereby U.S. forces are largely stationed outside of Japan during times of peace, but they retain the ability to surge to the region in a time of war. Certainly, some components of America’s forward posture can be moved back to U.S. soil to be reserved for a serious crisis, but crises are rarely either non-existent or clearly upon us. The 2004 tsunami relief response was a rare situation of a one-time, apolitical event, for which massive amounts of aid and equipment could flow to the region (e.g., a naval air base in Utapao, Thailand) and then flow back out when the job was finished.

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More often than not, dangerous diplomatic and military situations, such as China-Taiwan tensions, Chinese incursions into Japanese waters, or North Korea-Japan tensions, evolve incrementally, and they require an incremental or calibrated response. Changing the U.S.-Japan security relationship to a peacetime/wartime arrangement would only give the allies the equivalent of an “on” or “off” switch, when what is really needed is the advantage of having a range of different temperature settings. Another advantage of a forward U.S. deployment is a fast joint response. For example, the III MEF from Okinawa set up the entire temporary headquarters at Utapao for hundreds of multinational personnel for the tsunami relief effort within two days. They would not have been able to accomplish that mission so quickly if it was carried out from farther away, or if critical components of the team were broken up among different bases.

Ten years ago, it was clear to most Japanese policy makers that their country’s relationship to U.S. forces in the region was largely vertical and almost sub-contractual, as demonstrated in the focus on Japanese “rear area support” for U.S. operations. But many in Japan and the United States today are interested in developing a more horizontal or equal partner-type of relationship, as long as Japan’s activities remain within the bounds of its constitution. They would like to see closer command relationships between the two militaries and a greater degree of joint planning for non-combat operations. They would like to train together more regularly, share certain facilities, and enhance interoperability. All of these transformations can result in a slightly smaller U.S. footprint in Japan, but the reduced U.S. presence is not the purpose for these enhancements, it is merely one outcome.

The U.S. military footprint can and should be reduced, for the sake of Japan and for the sake of the alliance. U.S. officials understand this. They understand, for example, that night landing practice at Atsugi needs to be moved to a less populated area and that key Futenma capabilities should be relocated, among other adjustments. The introduction of new military technologies, recalibrating slightly the balance of U.S.-Japan responsibilities during “peacetime,” and achieving greater interoperability, co-basing, and joint planning will all help minimize the U.S. presence.

But, these are not painless solutions for Japan. They will mean more responsibility, larger investment requirements, difficult political judgments, and the potential for backlash from terrorist networks, rouge states, and wary neighbors. This is why Japan, together with the United States, needs to think comprehensively about its vision for regional and global security. Is it merely a refinement and wrap-up of the Joint Declaration of 1996, or is it a new and more challenging vision? The better answer for Japan is probably the latter, though movement in that direction will likely need to be incremental, and U.S. officials will need to be patient during this process.

We have a saying in America about this phenomenon, called “freedom isn’t free.” Americans are sometimes too quick to use this phrase to justify ill-advised military adventures, but at its core, the statement carries much weight and truth. Japan’s political leaders will need to help lead a broad debate that looks beyond the burden of one community and thinks about what is

The Current State of U.S.-Japan Strategic Dialogue: A Strategic Pause, or an Opportunity Slipping Away?

best for the nation. This is not about how to do the least necessary to satisfy the Americans, this is about creating a new strategic partnership with other nations to protect the values that are most important to all of us. The next few months are an opportunity to move, perhaps only one step for now, in that direction. We should not let it slip away.

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