

Moving Forward:  
The U.S.-Japan Alliance  
in 10 Years



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# Accommodating the Rise of China: Toward a Successful U.S.-Japan Alliance in 2017

By Kristi Elaine Govella

The U.S.-Japan alliance has been the cornerstone of East Asian security for over five decades and will continue to be an important part of regional affairs for years to come. However, this alliance must be altered to account for the significant shifts in global, regional, and domestic dynamics that have occurred since its establishment in 1951. Recent years have marked crucial initial steps in this process, but much work still remains to be done. In 10 years, the U.S.-Japan alliance should be a source of stability that works more inclusively to drive collaboration on the part of all regional actors; in order to accomplish this, it must provide an atmosphere conducive to a peaceful Chinese ascension and a new conception of Japanese leadership, while mediating the tensions between these two regional powers. In this essay, I identify three interrelated issues that have been exacerbated by the rise of China: the existence of a zero-sum mentality with regard to regional leadership, the threat of a security dilemma posed by mistrust between Japan and China, and the persistence of a historical legacy that has fed nationalistic tendencies in both countries. I outline steps that the U.S. can take to ameliorate these problems and to recraft the U.S.-Japan alliance in a way that better reflects and anticipates the changing realities of East Asia.

Attitudes toward leadership in East Asia are permeated by a zero-sum mentality; according to this line of thought, either Japan *or* China can be the regional leader, and the U.S. will align itself with only one of the two countries to best pursue its interests. In reality, an exclusive alliance between the U.S. and either of these countries no longer makes sense in modern East Asia; instead, the task must be to build good relations between the U.S. and *both* countries. Consequently, the U.S. must strike a balance between supporting Japan through the U.S.-Japan alliance and facilitating China's peaceful rise. The China portion of this equation is impossible to ignore, and indeed, giving China the incentives to progress down a path of peaceful integration and benign competition is a key part of a successful strategy in Asia. However, it is also vital that the U.S. avoid giving the impression (real or perceived) that Japan is being ignored or undermined by its long-time ally. In giving increased emphasis to relations with China, there is a natural danger that Japan might feel displaced. For example, in a 2007 report from the Japan Defense Research Center, Takayama Masaji cites Chinese "wish for a dissolution" of U.S.-Japan relations as a potential threat and cites the insult of President Bill Clinton's failure to visit Japan after a 10-day visit to China in 1999. Takayama also mentions changes in American referents for China; he notes Clinton's use of the term "strategic partner" and Bush's movement from labeling the PRC a "strategic competitor" to recognizing it as a "stakeholder." It is clear that Japan is highly sensitive to changes in its relative status, and consequently, the U.S. must tread carefully as it tries to accommodate the growing power of China.

Aside from proceeding with deliberate caution, the U.S. can also counter this zero-sum mentality by solidifying its relationship with Japan under the current terms of the alliance as it simultaneously builds relations with China. Concretely, this could involve further development of mechanisms for joint planning and coordination in security situations, which would ensure

that the partnership could function quickly and effectively in the event of a contingency. Relocating U.S. military bases in Japan to better reflect future challenges is a good first step, but further development of the alliance will require defining the roles, missions, and capabilities each country should bring to a situation and then developing those abilities through bilateral training. Moreover, the U.S. should work with Japan to create a coordinated China policy so that, at the very least, Japan does not find itself caught by surprise with regard to developments in U.S.-China relationships. Strengthening of the alliance will require the initiation and maintenance of long-standing personal relationships between policymakers in both countries.

In addition to ameliorating this problem of zero-sum attitudes, the U.S.-Japan alliance will also have to avert the emergence of a security dilemma. The mistrust between China and Japan means that Beijing fears both a strengthening *and* a weakening of the U.S.-Japan alliance; while the former would grant a larger security role to Japan, the latter might result in a hawkish return to militancy by a Japan unfettered by obligations to the U.S. Japan, in turn, is wary of Chinese ambitions to undermine its relationship with the U.S. and cognizant of investment in Chinese military capabilities. Thus, while it is important that Japan take on greater security responsibility, it is important that this be done in a way that does not alarm China; even defensive roles for Japan can seem threatening in this atmosphere of suspicion. One solution is for the U.S. to draw the focus of Japanese military activity away from the region, folding the Japanese security role into a larger mission of international peacekeeping; relatedly, any participation of the Self-Defense Forces in peacekeeping missions should be not performed under the auspices of the U.S.-Japan alliance but instead within a framework of international or regional cooperation. By helping other nations in this manner, Japan can claim moral high ground and assuage fears about a return to its imperialist past, increasing its soft power and international credibility. This approach would allow Japan's military development and participation to be framed as a public good instead of as a threat to regional security, shifting attention away from contentious areas such as the Taiwan Strait.

With respect to Japanese security involvement in East Asia, the U.S. should be very cautious about the roles it asks Japan to play, continuing to maintain a forward presence and the ability to act without significant participation from Japan, if necessary. This might mean a perpetuation of the “shield and spear” division of labor. Some fear that the U.S.-Japan alliance will be dangerously weakened if Japan's role is not clarified and expanded; however, this expansion has to take place in a strategic manner. Particularly in situations where the U.S. alone could effectively accomplish a task that might be rendered controversial in Japanese hands, the U.S. should refrain from seeking Japanese participation. Maintenance of sufficient U.S. military capabilities in the region would allow the U.S. to be selective about its request for Japanese assistance, weighing potential political harm against military gain. Ideally, the U.S. presence would not only help to manage and contain future crises but also to prevent them.

This security dilemma is exacerbated by historical legacies and rising nationalism, which are themselves enough of a problem to warrant specific attention. Japan's failure to satisfactorily deal with its past actions has meant that anti-Japanese sentiment still runs strong in China; the Chinese leadership's use of nationalism to bolster its legitimacy sometimes feeds off this negativity, which prompts a similar nationalistic reaction in Japan. Building trust between the major players of East Asia will be an essential part of ensuring the future stability of the region;

the U.S.-Japan alliance can bolster this process by becoming more inclusive and by refraining from pulling Japan away from Asia.

Instead, the U.S. should encourage Japan to become active in the burgeoning multilateral dialogues that have swept the region since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. At various times, the U.S. has seen Japanese participation in region-specific dialogues as a threat to its influence in East Asia. However, this participation is essential to the formation of a strong and positive Japanese leadership role. China has increasingly used multilateral initiatives to exhibit its potential for leadership and an indispensable role in regional affairs on one hand, and its benign intentions and willingness to have its power constrained on the other; at times, it has used multilateral forums to directly challenge Japanese leadership. For example, at the 2001 ASEAN+3 summit, China proposed an ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement, a dramatic act that Japan could only reciprocate with a promise to consider freer trade. Japan needs to adopt a more proactive role in these affairs, in contrast to simply reacting to Chinese initiatives; the U.S. and Japan could work to develop a coordinated approach to these region-specific interactions if it would help to assuage American fears. Moreover, the U.S. and Japan should collaborate to reinvigorate APEC, particularly as the Bogor goals deadline approaches in 2010. Though these multilateral dialogues are often considered peripheral to the “real” politics of the region, they are a pragmatic and effective way of building Japanese credibility in the region and starting to fashion a constructive yet non-threatening role for a more independent Japan in the future.

In conclusion, by balancing the need to accommodate the rise of China with support for a new conception of Japanese leadership, the U.S.-Japan alliance can become a source of stability that works more inclusively to drive collaboration on the part of all regional actors. Countering a zero-sum mentality toward regional leadership will require that the U.S. solidify its links to Japan through closer collaboration as it simultaneously builds relations with China, avoiding any signal that Japan is being ignored or displaced. In addition, the U.S. can help to avoid a security dilemma by folding Japan’s security role into a larger concept of international peacekeeping, drawing the focus of military collaboration away from the region; when collaboration is required in East Asia, the U.S. should be highly selective in asking for Japanese participation and maintain a presence substantial enough to conduct operations alone if necessary. The U.S. can also help moderate underlying tensions and rising nationalism in East Asia by encouraging Japanese participation in region-specific multilateral dialogues and reinvigorating APEC. These steps will help build stronger relations between the U.S., Japan, and China. Though they do not solve the larger problems of Asia in and of themselves, they may buy East Asia the time it needs to allow confidence-building measures and turnover in political regimes to have a positive effect on regional tensions. Fortunately, it is in each actor’s interest to foster regional stability over the next 10 years; though it seeks a change in the status quo, China first and foremost desires a peaceful international environment in which to foster its economic development. The coming decade could see further and perhaps unexpected shifts in the balance of power in East Asia, but by becoming a more inclusive source of stability and security for the region, the U.S.-Japan alliance can continue to play a positive role up to and beyond 2017.



## Commentary

By Shinjiro Koizumi

Kristi's paper grasps the importance of establishing healthy Japan-U.S.-China triangular relations for stability in Asia by identifying "three interrelated issues that have been exacerbated by the rise of China: 1) the existence of a zero-sum mentality with regard to regional leadership: 2) the threat of a security dilemma posed by mistrust between Japan and China: and 3) the persistence of a historical legacy that has fed into nationalistic tendencies in both countries." As she points out, there is a competition for regional leadership between Japan and China, seen in Japan's efforts to include democratic countries, such as India, Australia, and New Zealand in the East Asia Summit in order to moderate Chinese influence. Also, Japan has not been able to fully trust Chinese intentions due to its opaque military build-up and the intrusion of Chinese submarines into Japanese waters. Moreover, the world witnessed the rise of nationalism in the form of anti-Japanese demonstrations in China and the freeze of bilateral leadership exchanges. It is true that Japan and China have these complicated problems, but I would like to introduce two points that she does not mention.

First, Govella warns that even Japanese defensive roles could threaten China and proposes that Japan's Self-Defense Forces' participation in peace-keeping operations "should not be performed under the auspices of the U.S.-Japan alliance." It might be true that expanded cooperation between the U.S. and Japan invites China's military expansion and an arms race between Japan and China, but it is also possible for China to enhance its military capability even if Japan focuses on defensive operations. Thus, Japan's self-restraint might not stop China from enhancing its military.

Second, a perpetuation of the "shield and spear" division of labor between Japan and the U.S. does not seem to be a goal that both countries have pursued. Both Japan's biggest ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and the biggest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan, seem to have a converging understanding of the need to lift the ban on the exercise of the right of collective self-defense in order to play a greater security role under the U.S.-Japan alliance. Moreover, the realignment of U.S. forces in Japan to enhance the quality of the alliance is in progress.

Although Govella's paper does not address these two points, she did depict the issues that the U.S. and Japan need to tackle together by emphasizing China's perception of the U.S.-Japan alliance and how the U.S. strikes a balance between Japan and China in order to realize a peaceful Asia. It is critical for Japan and the U.S. to manage their relations with China, but the U.S. needs to understand that its balancing act between Japan and China could send a wrong signal "that Japan is being ignored or displaced," as she states. She reminds readers of the importance of U.S.-Japan cooperation vis-à-vis the rise of China and how the creation of a stable Japan-U.S.-China triangle requires U.S. sensitivity to Japan's fear of being sidelined.





# Requirements for the Japan-U.S. Alliance and the Rise of China

By Shinjiro Koizumi

In 2017, the U.S.-Japan alliance will remain in East Asia as an important stabilizer for regional security, and more visible and closer cooperation between Japan and the United States will be realized after the completion of the realignment of U.S. forces in Japan (expected to be done by 2014). The second Armitage-Nye Report, *“The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Getting Asia Right through 2020,”* which was released in February, clearly states that “the keystone of the United States’ position in Asia remains the U.S.-Japan alliance.” If there is a revision of the Constitution of Japan or reinterpretation of Article 9 by 2017 in order to exercise the right of collective self-defense, the Japan-U.S. alliance would become more equal, and areas of bilateral cooperation would expand. In other words, Japan’s decision to exercise the right of collective self-defense is critical to a strengthened Japan-U.S. alliance. Furthermore, Japan and the U.S. also have to develop a strategy to reconcile their strengthened alliance with the rise of China. This short paper examines two key challenges in upgrading the U.S.-Japan alliance: 1) Japan’s need to lift the ban on the use of the right of collective self-defense, and 2) addressing China’s rise.

## Japan and the Right of Collective Self-Defense

Although Japan has spent more than 50 years discussing whether to exercise the right of collective-self defense, there has been a noticeable convergence in the discussion in recent years after the steady advance of the Japan-U.S. alliance followed by the review of the defense guidelines in 1997 and the Nye Initiative, the post 9/11 world situation that has led to expanded Japan Self-Defense Force activities, and notably, the emergence of a new generation of Japanese politicians. Many politicians in both the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) began to realize the limitations imposed by the current constitutional interpretation of the right of collective-self defense (Japan possesses the right, but does not have a duty to defend the U.S. forces outside of Japanese territory) on Japan’s role as an ally, especially in the context of maritime defense cooperation to protect sea lines of communication. For example, former DPJ leader Seiji Maehara is a strong advocate of the Japan-U.S. alliance and exercising the right of collective self-defense. Although he did not succeed, he tried to reach a consensus on this issue during his tenure from September 2005 to April 2006. In the LDP, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has frequently shown his desire to revise the current interpretation of the constitution. In his first policy speech to the Diet in September 2006, he argued that Japan should “thoroughly study individual, specific cases to identify what kind of case falls under the exercise of the right of collective self-defense which is forbidden under the Constitution, so that the Japan-U.S. alliance functions more effectively and peace is maintained.”<sup>1</sup>

As Abe said, enabling the exercise of the right of collective self-defense would raise the effectiveness of the Japan-U.S. alliance. In addition, being ready to exercise the right of collective self-defense would make Japan’s cooperation with countries in Asia like Australia and India easier, especially for maritime security cooperation. Thus, the reinterpretation of the right

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<sup>1</sup> Policy Speech by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to the 165<sup>th</sup> session of the Diet, Sept. 29, 2006, [www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/abespeech/2006/09/29speech\\_e.html](http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/abespeech/2006/09/29speech_e.html)

of collective self-defense makes the U.S.-Japan alliance more effective and broadens Japan's diplomatic horizons.

Further, Japan's departure from its self-imposed restrictions will give it more confidence as an alliance partner and enable it to contribute more to and improve the quality of the alliance. Given the unequal character of the alliance as it currently stands (i.e., the U.S. has a duty to defend Japan, but Japan does not have a similar duty to the U.S.), the alliance is seen by some critics as something that the U.S. forced on Japan, not as a symbol of successful Japan-U.S. relations since Japan's defeat in World War II. Confidence is the most important basis for the alliance, and that confidence will not be further generated unless Japan assumes a greater security role commensurate with its capabilities.

The era in which the U.S. shoulders a one-sided burden for the defense of Japan is over. Globalization has repainted not only the world economy but also the security environment, and has required Japan to make its utmost efforts to solidify the Japan-U.S. alliance to cope with nontraditional threats and contribute to regional stability. Therefore, it is perfectly natural that Richard P. Lawless, then deputy under secretary of defense for Asia-Pacific affairs, said (according to LDP member Shigeru Ishiba, who met with Lawless) "it would be 'crazy' of Japan not to shoot down a missile clearly heading toward the United States."<sup>2</sup> In order to do so, Japan will face a difficult decision to change its current interpretation of the right of collective self-defense while dispelling neighbors' doubts about Japan's greater security role. As long as Japan continues to prohibit the exercise of the right of collective self-defense, it will not be able to feel confident about its security role in the region.

### **Addressing the Rise of China**

It is impossible to ignore the China factor when considering the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Although the reinterpretation of the right of collective-self defense is necessary for Japan to feel more confident about its role in the region, Japan must not regard that as part of an effort to contain or hedge against China with the U.S. It is often said that there are two scenarios for China's rise, one optimistic and one pessimistic. The optimistic scenario features China as a responsible stakeholder that contributes to regional prosperity by becoming more democratic and working actively with other regional powers to resolve common problems in East Asia. The pessimistic scenario presents a China that would remain nationalistic, mercantilistic, and undemocratic, and faces serious social problems that could bring chaos, and requires an extremely strong and well-coordinated U.S.-Japan leadership to maintain regional stability. On the other hand, an optimistic case does not mean that the Japan-U.S. alliance does not face challenges regarding the rise of China. On the contrary, China as a responsible stakeholder could pose other difficult questions for the alliance.

China's positive role in the region and the world can create more areas of cooperation for Japan and the U.S. If Japan and China can find a way to manage their history and the East China Sea resource development issues, Japan-China relations could become "hot politics, hot economics (the current situation is hot economics, cold politics)." The U.S. would also strengthen its political, economic, and military ties with China. If China becomes a responsible

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<sup>2</sup> *The Japan Times*, Dec. 7, 2006, [search.japantimes.co.jp/member/member.html?appURL=nn20061207a3.html](http://search.japantimes.co.jp/member/member.html?appURL=nn20061207a3.html)

stakeholder and plays a constructive role not only on the issue of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (as it has done so far), but also for other issues such as Iran's nuclear program, stabilization of the Middle East, or a positive contribution to poverty reduction and economic growth in Africa, it would be natural for the U.S. to work more closely with China. It also seems reasonable for Japan to cooperate more with China.

However, China's rise as a responsible stakeholder would require very careful alliance management by both Japan and the U.S. Historically, closer U.S.-China relations tend to create a perception in Japan of "Japan passing," and Japan has tended to judge U.S. presidents on whether they are pro-Japan or pro-China. Hence the question is whether Japan can regard closer U.S.-China relations as a good stability in Asia. It is very difficult for Japan to welcome China's bigger role if China's rise means the advent of a new regional power balance: China as a regional leader and Japan as a country in decline. In order to prevent this, Japan needs to play a greater security role in the region by exercising the right of collective self-defense. This does not mean a hedging strategy against China. On the contrary, it gives Japan more responsibility and confidence to build stable Japan-U.S.-China relations.

Japan is always looking at how the U.S. treats China and how it is treated by the U.S. vis-à-vis China. The U.S. must be sensitive to this Japanese psychology. Japan has been proud of its status as the world's second largest economy and considers that part of its national identity, but it will lose the status sooner or later and face the painful reality that China and India are catching up at a frightening pace. Japan has a dilemma. On the one hand, it acknowledges that a China that follows a stakeholder scenario is in Japan's interest. On the other hand, it worries that the stakeholder scenario would lead the U.S. to pay less attention to Japan. Japan would continue suffering from the dilemma as long as it maintains a limited security role under the current interpretation of the right of collective self-defense.

## **Conclusion**

Facing limitations of its security role, the post-9/11 world situation, and a new generation of leaders, Japan seems to be headed for a consensus on the reinterpretation of the right of collective self-defense in order to play a greater security role. In addition, it is important to recognize the important role of the U.S.-Japan alliance in the context of a rising China. No one expects stability in Northeast Asia without the alliance. Japan and the U.S. have every reason to keep enhancing the alliance to accommodate the peaceful rise of China and address new and emerging threats. However, Japan will never become fully confident of its relations with the U.S. without assuming a greater role as an ally. Confidence is the foundation of the alliance, and a more confident Japan will reinforce the basis of the Japan-U.S. alliance and deepen mutual trust. For building a healthy U.S.-Japan-China triangle, a Japan that can exercise the right of collective self-defense is a necessary component, and it will be a public good in Asia.



## Commentary

By Kristi Elaine Govella

Koizumi's essay insightfully addresses two key challenges to strengthening this important alliance: 1) Japan's position on the issue of collective self-defense and 2) the rise of China. For Koizumi, lifting the ban on collective defense is necessary for building a "healthy U.S.-Japan-China triangle." He argues that this change in security policy would render Japan a more confident partner and increase the effectiveness of the alliance at a time when the U.S. cannot or will no longer shoulder a "one-sided burden" for Japanese defense. He also sees an increased security role as a solution to the Japanese dilemma of simultaneously accepting China as a powerful stakeholder while maintaining American attention.

Koizumi is correct in isolating these two issues as central challenges; however, there may be an inherent tension in his twin goals of strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance and addressing the rise of China, a tension that remains unaddressed in his essay. While a larger Japanese security role makes the alliance more effective and "broadens Japan's diplomatic horizons," it is also quite possible that even a larger defensive role for Japan would result in a security dilemma with China. In an atmosphere of distrust like the one that currently pervades East Asia, the disparity between "intent" and "perception" becomes critical. Even if Japan intends to provide a collective good for the region, its actions may not be interpreted as such, implying that the path to greater security participation must be tread with great caution.

Koizumi also emphasizes an enhanced security role as a way for Japan to address its own decline. However, Japan has long cultivated a role of "leadership from behind," both by choice and due to the constraints imposed on it by its World War II legacy. While the effectiveness of this leadership style seems to be declining and may be unsustainable, it seems that many of the same constraints still exist. Mistrust of Japanese intentions and actions, particularly on the part of China and Korea, will continue to pose difficulties for the country. Even if Japan makes the domestic decision to lift the ban on the exercise of the right of collective self-defense, will it be able to utilize its capabilities without provoking suspicion or fear on the part of its neighbors? Japan may need to be more creative about fashioning a new type of leadership role for itself through soft power or building on its economic strengths, instead of pursuing security leadership alone.

This essay is an excellent treatment of the changing circumstances and attitudes affecting the U.S. and Japan; its emphasis on the need for greater Japanese security responsibility is timely and reflects the primary concern of many policymakers. However, one might take greater account of the regional and historical contexts of Japanese security participation, as these have bearing on Japan's ability to support the alliance. Building a "healthy U.S.-Japan-China" triangle is the key to future peace and prosperity, but this triangle becomes lopsided when focusing largely on the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-China legs – the Japan-China relationship is just as critical. If Japan and China can find a way to manage their historical and contemporary tensions, Asia and the world will benefit immensely; the difficulties inherent in such an endeavor should not be taken lightly.