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Old Friends, New Times: the Perception Gap and the Future of the U.S.-Japan Alliance

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Since the end of World War II, the U.S.-Japan alliance has been conceptualized as the key force underpinning security in the Asia-Pacific, once described by the late Senator Michael Mansfield as “the most important bilateral relationship in the world, bar none.” However, much has changed since the end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, leading many to question the structure of the alliance and its relevance for the world today. Moreover, the definition and future direction of the U.S.-Japan alliance have been the subject of debate not only amongst political spectators but among the allies themselves. On March 28-29, 2008, Pacific Forum CSIS Young Leaders from North America and Japan gathered to discuss these issues, and specifically, to identify and illuminate the perception gap in each country’s security priorities and in their individual visions for the future of the alliance. The following are the thoughts of the North American Young Leaders attending the seminar.

Does Our Ally Understand Us? Japanese Perceptions of U.S. Security Priorities

While Japan generally understands the security priorities of its ally, the difficulty seems to lie in its ranking of these priorities rather than in their identification. For instance, while both the U.S. and Japan list North Korea among their top security concerns, U.S. concern over the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) is largely fueled by the larger proliferation issue and the possible spread of nuclear technology from North Korea to terrorist organizations. Japanese anxieties surround their country’s close proximity to a new nuclear weapons-enabled state and the unresolved issue of a number of Japanese citizens abducted by the DPRK in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, while the countries may agree on the importance of dealing with a nuclear North Korea and a rising China, the motivations for doing so and the opinions about what should be done may not be aligned. If not recognized and addressed, this divergence in reasons for prioritization will cause potential friction in the relationship, particularly when the goal of one country is achieved seemingly at the expense of the other. We have already seen this happening during the Six-Party Talks, with the U.S. and Japan often in disagreement about the expectations that the DPRK should have to meet to be removed from the U.S. list of states that sponsor terrorism, for example.

A more overt divergence of perceptions is evident in Japanese and U.S. perceptions of the War on Terror. Since 9/11, this war has been the focus of the Bush administration, and has consumed many resources of the U.S. A war without physical boundaries, this conflict also dominates U.S. security concerns in East Asia and has direct relevance for the U.S.-Japan alliance. The support of some Japanese politicians, most notably former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, for the U.S.-led war on terror seemed to bring the two countries closer together, but recent changes in the Japanese domestic political scene have made this kind of support unlikely, with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) at odds on a host of issues. This political stalemate has complicated an already complex political environment within Japan with respect to alliance management.

The refueling mission for the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) was but one example – and symptom – of the problem. Moreover, the tone of Japanese support for the war on terror strikes some as a public relations strategy designed to avoid the criticisms of “checkbook diplomacy” that Japan received during the first Gulf War. Thus, Japan finds itself pulled in many directions, particularly between meeting the expectations of its ally and the international community and between dealing with the gridlock currently dominating its domestic politics.

Understanding Ourselves: Identifying U.S. Security Priorities in East Asia

We have identified the following three U.S. security priorities in East Asia:

1) Upholding Previous Military Agreements

The U.S.-Japan military alliance is a key pillar of the U.S. military presence and involvement in the East Asian region. Since the end of the Cold War, attempts have been made to transform the alliance into an entity that better serves this purpose; however, implementation of these changes has been slow and problematic. This aspect of the alliance is often frustrating for the U.S. military because of Japan’s struggle to overcome a pacifist constitution, pacifist public, regional pressure for less military activity out of Japan’s territory, and reluctance to spend any significant part of their budget on the JSDF. A first and essential step in ensuring the security of East Asia will be for the U.S. to shore up its key alliance in the region. For example, force realignment plans agreed under the Defense Policy Review Initiative (DPRI), once fully implemented, will help move forward joint efforts to engage or hedge against China and maintain peace between China and Taiwan.

2) Determining Clear Priorities

The U.S.-Japan alliance was designed in a different time for a different purpose; as such, both nations need to nurture the alliance and help it to best meet the needs of today’s security environment. The two countries should find a way to use their respective strengths to enhance their partnership. For example, instead of criticizing Japan for not making headway in its journey toward becoming a “normal country,” the U.S. should find space for Japan to help in ways that are less controversial but still contribute to the alliance. That said, the U.S. and Japan should avoid, in their enthusiasm for nurturing their relationship, trying to make the alliance all things to all people. The U.S.-Japan alliance is fundamentally a military alliance; clear priorities will help it grow, while a proliferation of side projects and tangents will only cause it to suffer. Other types of cooperation are important, but they should operate under different auspices.

If the U.S. wants to create a more comprehensive approach to the region, it will mean working to dispel the notion that Japan and the U.S. work in lockstep. Successful examples can be found in other U.S. bilateral relationships; while the U.S. and the United Kingdom share a close military relationship, London and Washington deal with trade issues much differently than they do military ones. Thus, a bilateral alliance in one area does not require bilateral alliance in all areas to remain viable. Policymakers should be careful to limit the

kinds of issues that alliance managers are directly responsible for, and the constituents within their respective governments to whom they are accountable. This does not mean that Japan and the U.S. should not deal with climate change or pandemic flu, or that they should not attempt to work together to build stronger regional institutions in the region. It means only that these jobs should not be taken on in the halls of PACOM or the Pentagon, but should reside in more appropriate government departments or intergovernmental organizations.

Determining clear priorities will play an important role in stabilizing the North Korean threat, as both the U.S. and Japan should resolve their differences with regard to what they hope to achieve with respect to the DPRK. The Six-Party Talks represent an important opportunity for the allies to work together to achieve improvements on a common security threat. The allies should strive to minimize their public disagreement and to show a united front to those they hope to convince, while each endeavors to protect its own interests as well as that of its key partners.

3) Managing the War on Terror

The war on terror will continue to dominate U.S. security policy into the next presidency. However, the United States should be wary that the war on terror and the call for burden sharing from its alliance partners is not its major concern in Asia. It should be remembered that Northeast Asia and the security problems there are different from other parts of the globe. Security concerns such as disaster relief, piracy, global warming, energy resources, sustainable development, stopping the spread of nuclear proliferation, and pandemic diseases are much more likely to be of concern to Asian neighbors and friends than a mission to eradicate terrorism in the Middle East. When asking for support from its allies and partners, the U.S. should carefully consider the burden that it is putting on these countries. Moreover, the U.S. should take care not to neglect the region or its allies, despite the considerable attention that it must devote to other areas. It should maintain its participation in bilateral and multilateral dialogues and avoid the impression that the U.S. is disinterested in Asia simply because it is not as troubled as other regions.

Implications of this Perception Gap for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

While there seems to be consensus on priorities within the U.S.-Japan alliance, there is actually less unity than it seems. Many priority issues are the same, but the underlying rationales for prioritization are different, and this subtle disagreement threatens to pose problems. Thus, while the Japan and the U.S. agree that North Korea is a problem, their motivations and resultant policy preferences differ. The implication of this perception gap is simple misunderstanding in the best case, and acrimony and mutual suspicion in the worst. To address this tension, there needs to be more effort to promote understanding and build consensus on priorities and potential solutions. Ideally, Japan would become a strong player in Asia, one that could be a strong partner for the U.S. The U.S. in turn would work proactively and cooperatively with Japan to tackle the challenges of the region. This will require much more communication and cooperation than is currently possible, even just in terms of intelligence sharing or discussions between leaders.

While Japan should make earnest attempts to deal with its very genuine domestic concerns, the U.S. should be mindful of Japan's domestic political situation and understand the constraints under which its leaders must operate. The DPJ is neither pro- nor anti-alliance, but it has chosen to pursue a strategy of disagreeing with the LDP, implying the role that the JSDF can play abroad will continue to be limited in the near term. Still, Japan cannot continue to place blame on domestic political turmoil if it wants to maintain a healthy alliance as well as its relevance as a global power; former Prime Minister Koizumi proved that it is possible to navigate Japan's bureaucracy with strong leadership skills, and the bar has been raised. At the same time, maintaining trust in the alliance requires the U.S. to not to expect Japan to automatically follow its lead. Even U.S. experts on Japan seem to listen to and then summarily dismiss Japanese concerns about their own domestic politics, economics, and security.

Perceptions and allies aside, Japan faces other more concrete obstacles to enlarging its security role in Asia. Much of the rest of Asia is hesitant to see a more robust JSDF, with many countries still sensitive to the legacy of Japanese aggression during World War II. However, Japan cannot hope to tackle these external challenges until it comes to a clearer understanding of what exactly it wants to do. Japan's politicians must be aware of this challenge and strive to balance a robust international agenda with a feasible domestic one.

Conclusion: A Stronger Alliance through Understanding and Trust

The U.S.-Japan alliance is as integral a part of the security of the United States, Japan, and the Asia-Pacific Region – as it has been for the last 50 years. However, the world has changed, and the time has come for the alliance partners to strive for greater understanding of and trust in one another. This group finds that the perception gap between these two countries may be exaggerated, there are however important, albeit subtle, sources of tension that must be addressed. Now, when the region is free of overt conflict, is a perfect time for these subtleties to be hammered out and for the allies to work to make their partnership into a sound and viable means of securing the region. They have a solid base on which to build, but the cultivation of greater understanding and trust will be essential to ensuring the strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance.