The Changing US-Japan Security Alliance

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Ever since Commodore Perry sailed his black ships into Okinawa in 1853, the United States has had a keen interest in Japan. The US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, signed in January 1960, was a response to the demands of the Cold War. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 90's, the stability of the Alliance has been tested more than once. In order to adapt to the new security environment, the alliance has had to change, incorporating the ideas and goals of both nations into a mutually beneficial arrangement for assuring regional security. In the face of an emerging China, this alliance has become more vital than ever in maintaining the balance of power.

Yoichi Funabashi, in Alliance Adrift, points out that during the Cold War, the US-Japan Alliance was largely viewed as a “part of the larger mosaic of the Soviet-American nuclear ‘balance of terror’” (1999: 274). Japan was needed as a deterrent to the Soviet Union. The motivation behind the alliance stemmed primarily from Article 5 of the Mutual Security Treaty, which basically states that the US would defend Japan if Japanese territory was attacked. “Bilateral security cooperation had always emphasized the Article 5 aspect of defending Japan proper” (Funabashi 1999: 274). In terms of nuclear weapons, this meant that the US would extend it “nuclear umbrella” to cover Japan, thus deterring any nuclear attack by the Soviet Union on Japan.

The Cold War strategic alliance was characterized by the dominance of the US in the security arena. Japan was able to rebuild itself while secure in the fact that it was protected. The alliance was also characterized by a degree of deference to the US. Complaints about the US presence were repressed or put aside in order to maintain the appearance of a comfortable, solid relationship.

One main challenge that the US-Japan alliance faced during the Cold War was the initiation of relations between the US and the PRC. These new and improved relations with China caused the US to proceed carefully, especially in areas of conflict between China and Japan. One example of this approach by the US was the on-going dispute over territorial rights to the Senkaku Islands. “During its occupation of Okinawa, the United States consistently maintained that the ‘territorial rights were Japan’s’ . . . Despite this fact, when the US government called for the Senate to ratify the Okinawa Reversion Treaty, it clearly demonstrated its intention to maintain 'neutrality' concerning the question of Japanese and Taiwanese
territorial claims to the Senkakus” (Funabashi 1999: 404-405).

The end of the Cold War called for a complete overhaul of the US-Japanese Alliance. The new alliance was to focus primarily upon Article 6 of the Mutual Security Treaty. Article 6 basically states that the US and Japan will work to ensure security in the East Asian region. “The US government had consistently shown an interest in conducting joint Article 6 operations within the framework of the bilateral security structure” (Funabashi 1999: 274). The Japanese also became increasingly interested in such actions as political offices began to be filled by younger, more nationalistic individuals.

The reworked alliance has been and will be characterized by the Japanese exerting greater influence. Japan no longer wishes to be considered a "free rider" within the relationship. In his article, “Why Tokyo Will Be a Larger Player in Asia,” Michael Green writes, “There is a growing consensus among Japanese that their nation must have more ownership of the alliance and do more on its own to influence the security environment . . . This shift is occurring because of generational change; fatigue over apologizing for history; insecurity caused by the stagnation of the economy; and the clear and present danger thrust in the Japanese consciousness by events like the 1996 Taiwan Straits crisis” (2000: 2).

China still proves to be the biggest challenge to the US-Japan relationship. “Both countries agreed that ‘extreme caution needed to be exercised when strengthening the US security relationship in a non-threatening way to China’” (Funabashi 1999: 428). China has often reproached Japan, using Asianism to nudge Japan away from the US. China also employed methods to promote mistrust of Japan among Americans, such as “‘Japanese containment’ or the cap-in-the-bottle argument” (Funabashi 1999: 436).

The alliance also faces the challenge of the conflict between security and economics. Trade disputes between the US and Japan has often raised tensions between the two countries. The Nye Report emphasizes the need for balance between trade and security issues. “‘We must not allow trade friction to undermine our security alliance [but] if public support for the relationship is to be maintained over the long term, progress must continue to be made by both sides in addressing fundamental economic issues’” (Funabashi 1999: 263).

Public opinion is yet another challenge facing the alliance. Since the rape of an Okinawan schoolgirl by US Marines, demonstrations opposing both the Status of Forces Agreement and the
presence of US Marines have increased. Perhaps the feelings of Okinawans toward the US military can be summed up in the words of one demonstrator: “We don't need the marines anymore. Perhaps we needed you during the Korean War, or shortly afterwards, but we don't need you anymore. Asia is at peace” (Funabashi 1999: 301). What many Okinawans do not seem to realize is that the destabilization of the Asian security environment by the recent financial crisis, coupled with the development and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction by Asian states, could result in a future where Asia is no longer at peace.

The US-Japan alliance has always been a stabilizing force in East Asia. Following WWII, the US Presence acted as a buffer between Japan and Asia. This allowed Asian nations to become comfortable with the new, peaceful Japan. In addition, the alliance allowed Japan to concentrate on economic growth and development. “Japan’s success was a decisive element in fostering democracy in the Asian-Pacific region and creating a climate of economic interdependence” (Funabashi 1999: 451). Japan’s success also increased America’s prestige and acceptance in the region.

The economic crisis of the late nineties changed Asia’s view of Japan and the US. The supposedly perfect “Japanese model” of economic development was exposed as heavily flawed. Asian nations began looking to their smaller neighbors, forming alliances with no form of balance or order. A goal of the US-Japan alliance should be the restoration of some form of order in the trend toward Asian multilateralism.

“IT [Japan] must develop trust-building measures with each country and create a multilateral, peaceful framework. It must create a vehicle for and promote the habit of dialogue among itself, the US, and China” (Funabashi 1999: 452).

I agree with Kurt Campbell’s comment that US foreign policy concerning East Asia focuses on three points. First, the US has a desire to engage China to gradually incorporate it into the security order. Second, the US intends to maintain its bilateral treaties, primarily with Japan and South Korea, and to keep a US military presence in the region. Third, the US is committed to increasing trade and investment flows to Asia, both to further economic development and economic recovery following the Asian financial crisis (Kurt Campbell, Nov. 8 Symposium, University of Richmond).

In my opinion, I do not believe the US can simultaneously embrace China and improve relations
with Japan. The historical conflicts between the two countries are enough to create a crisis within the US-Japan alliance. Thus, I believe it would be more profitable for the US to strengthen its relationship with Japan. Many say China is a better choice, citing economics as the more important issue. “‘China is a more natural partner for America than Japan. Why? Because the Chinese market is more open than Japan’s’” (Funabashi 1999: 438). However, there is more to an alliance than economics. On security issues, China has most often been at odds with the US. On the other hand, Japan has basically adhered to the security policies put forth by the US. Also, China has often tried to create divisions in US bilateral alliances to advance its own objectives. Japan, to my knowledge, has never tried such petty maneuvers. Thus, while Japan may have certain faults that need to be discussed, it will be easier to compromise with Japan than it will be with China.

In conclusion, I would like to express my opinion that the US-Japan alliance is the most important bilateral alliance in Asia, perhaps the most important in the world. In order for this alliance to remain potent, compromises must be made on issues concerning the balance of trade and the level of US forces in Okinawa. Asia has undergone a myriad of changes within the past decade, and continues to exhibit change. With change comes opportunity, but also uncertainty. The US-Japan alliance plays a pivotal role in maintaining a sense of stability in the midst of such change. It is for this reason that both sides of this alliance must make all attempts to maintain it.
Works Cited
