



Five Steps to Bolster the US-Japan Alliance

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IN JANUARY 2020, the United States and Japan marked the 60th anniversary of the revised US-Japan Security Treaty. This anniversary was an important milestone that reflects the determination of both countries to overcome the numerous difficulties that have arisen over the years to sustain this important alliance. It should also serve as a reminder that the US-Japan alliance should not be taken for granted.

The regional security order today faces serious strains. US-China rivalry is intensifying, there are a number of flashpoints around East Asia that could easily erupt into a crisis, and US foreign policy under President Donald Trump continues to be characterized by unpredictability. Some may argue that Tokyo would be wise to seek some neutral ground at a distance from both the United States and China, but for Japan there really is no viable option other than to work to shore up the US-Japan alliance and encourage the United States to deepen its commitment as well. Securing the sustainability of the alliance over the coming decades will require the United States and Japan to adopt a comprehensive and multilayered approach to security cooperation.

East Asian Security Under Strain

The last 60 years have witnessed many major changes in the US-Japan alliance and East Asia's regional order. During the Cold War, the shared objective was to contain the threat of the Soviet Union, and thus the end of the Cold War required the two countries to reconsider the *raison d'être* of the alliance. In 1996, US President Bill Clinton and Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto reaffirmed the alliance for the post-Cold War era with the US-Japan Joint Security Declaration, which bolstered and clarified US-Japan cooperation to address regional unpredictability. Subsequently, Japan gradually expanded the roles and missions of its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to make greater contributions to support the US military in the region.

Yet over the last quarter century, the security environment in East Asia has become increasingly characterized by tensions. One fundamental change is the rise of China. Ten years ago, China overtook Japan as the second biggest economy in the world and today its GDP is nearly three times the size of Japan's. China's rapid economic growth has enabled it to expand its military capabilities, making it the

second biggest defense spender in the world. China has also displayed increasingly assertive behavior that has fed tensions at flashpoints around the region, whether in the South China Sea, the East China Sea around the Senkaku Islands, Hong Kong, or across the Taiwan Straits.

Chinese growth has slowed from its heyday of 10 percent annual GDP growth, but it was still expected to reach 6 percent under the “new normal,” at least before the coronavirus outbreak hit. Yet, China faces considerable difficulties. To the extent that the future decline of Chinese economic growth comes to be associated with domestic frustrations over tightly controlled individual freedoms, the legitimacy of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule may be shaken. The CCP’s handling of the coronavirus epidemic demonstrates serious shortcomings of the current system, which incentivizes a lack of political transparency. In the event that the legitimacy of its rule is seriously questioned, there is a risk that the CCP may adopt a more aggressive foreign policy as a diversionary tactic to distract from domestic shortcomings.

Meanwhile, the behavior of the Trump administration has made the United States a source of unpredictability as well. Under the banner of “America First,” the United States is moving away from multilateral cooperation. The Trump administration is unilaterally demanding that allies make exorbitant increases in their defense budgets and host-nation support while sowing doubt over US defense commitments. Moreover, the Trump administration’s unilateral imposition of tariffs and obstruction of the WTO Appellate Body undermines the global rules-based trading system.

Where to Next for the US-Japan Alliance?

US allies in Europe are expressing concerns that the United States under President Trump no longer upholds its traditional values, such as free trade, democracy, and human rights. NATO allies have also decried the failure of the United States to consult in advance on critical moves, such as its withdrawal in Syria and the killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. These developments have fueled discussion in the European Union about the reliability of the United States and the possible need to come up with a “plan B” for an independent security system without the United States. Similarly, in East Asia, the US standoff with

South Korea regarding burden sharing for US military forces and the Philippines’ announcement that it will terminate its Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States risks undermining security networks in the region.

Nonetheless, Japan has compelling reasons to sustain and strengthen its commitment to the US-Japan alliance despite the current challenges. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has worked hard to promote strong relations with the United States irrespective of Trump’s tariff threats and demands for extraordinary increases in host-nation support. Japan would struggle to cope with the rise of China on its own without the support of US military might, and it is not feasible for Japan to seek its own nuclear deterrent outside of the US nuclear umbrella.

The Trump administration has at times criticized the US-Japan alliance for lacking proper reciprocity. Yet aiming to have an absolutely reciprocal alliance relationship in the near future would not serve US or Japanese interests, nor would it improve regional stability. With the April 2015 revision of the US-Japan Defense Cooperation Guidelines and the September 2015 security legislation freeing the SDF to engage in limited forms of collective self-defense, reinterpretation of the Article 9 “peace clause” of Japan’s Constitution may have reached its limit. Far-reaching formal revisions of Article 9 to “normalize” Japan remain a controversial prospect due to both domestic public sentiment as well as lingering regional suspicions given Japan’s historical wartime aggression. At the same time, Japan’s provision of military bases to the United States serves not only to secure Japan but also to promote the broader security of the Asia Pacific and enable the United States to maintain its status as a Pacific power. The US-Japan alliance continues to be a win-win, but alliance cooperation needs to be enhanced and fine-tuned to meet the challenges of the current era.

Toward More Comprehensive and Multi-layered Security

A number of steps should be taken at both the bilateral and multilateral levels in order to bolster the US-Japan alliance and foster the type of comprehensive and multilayered approach to security cooperation that will be essential to maintain an effective alliance in the coming decades. This should include the following five key elements.

1. Do More to Lighten the US Footprint in Okinawa

Additional measures are needed to reduce the burden on local Okinawan communities that host US military bases. Close to 70 percent of US military facilities in Japan are concentrated in Okinawa, and efforts to reduce this burden have so far failed to yield results. Failure to address this politically divisive issue risks undermining the long-term goodwill between the United States and Japan that serves as a key foundation for alliance cooperation.

Renewed efforts should be put into closing Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in a timely manner while maintaining the integrity of the US forward deployment strategy and expeditionary capabilities. Almost 20 years have passed since the original agreement to relocate the base was reached, with little to show for it. This is much too long. A new approach is needed to break this impasse. Generally, the Marines conduct an expeditionary combat role without their own transport or bases in foreign countries, which undermines the argument for maintaining Futenma. Moreover, the number of Marines stationed at Futenma is insufficient to deal with likely contingencies on the Korean Peninsula or Taiwan on their own without reinforcements. Therefore, the viability of relocating Marines to Guam and using Navy and Air transport for contingency scenarios should be seriously reexamined as one potential measure to alleviate Okinawa's burden.

2. Expand Japan's Defense Budget

Japan should continue to incrementally increase its defense budget. It must ensure that the SDF has the capabilities it needs to work together with the United States to defend Japan and to contribute to joint efforts to maintain regional stability. At the same time, Japan should also strive to make reasonable increases in its host-nation support for US military forces stationed in Japan under the banner of deepening US-Japan security cooperation. Yet President Trump's demands go too far. Japanese host-nation support for the maintenance of facilities and to pay the salaries of Japanese personnel employed on US bases deepens US-Japan cooperation, but having Japan pay to employ US forces would undermine the principle of US-Japan cooperation.

3. Bolster Regional Security Cooperation on Nonproliferation

Nontraditional security cooperation in Northeast Asia should also be expanded. For instance, there is a critical need for the Six-Party Talks countries to deal with the nuclear nonproliferation and missile issues that are undermining regional stability. As the Six-Party Talks are not currently operational, the region is relying on direct US–North Korea negotiations to achieve the next step in the North Korean denuclearization process. However, at some point, the Six-Party Talks will need to be reconvened as a multilateral forum to oversee implementation of any possible US–North Korea agreement. This should include parallel roadmaps on denuclearizing North Korea and transforming the Korean War Armistice Agreement into a permanent peace treaty. Multilateralizing the process among all key regional stakeholders will help to safeguard ongoing international verification of denuclearization against accusations of foul play and ensure the long-term sustainability of the peace process.

It is also vital to reconsider the regulation of medium- and long-range missiles. Regional tensions are being fueled by North Korea's development of its missile program, China's rapid development of new missile capabilities, the deployment of THAAD in South Korea, and the Trump administration's termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia. The failure to address the shifting balance in missile technology risks triggering an arms race. The Six-Party Talks can also be utilized to tamp down tensions in this area and, ultimately, this forum should be transformed into a permanent vehicle to promote mutual confidence and trust and to tackle shared challenges to peace and stability in the region.

4. Expand Security Cooperation with New Partners

Japan should continue to expand its bilateral and trilateral security cooperation with other countries beyond the United States. This should include deepening security cooperation with partners such as Australia, India, the ASEAN nations, and South Korea. Renewing commitments to US–Japan–South Korea trilateral cooperation, for instance, which has been weakened by recent tensions between Japan and South Korea over wartime history and trade restrictions, is critical to show a unified face to North Korea and establish a credible basis for

denuclearization negotiations. Expanding Japan's security cooperation with regional partners should not just be geared toward bolstering Japan's defense or countering specific threats, but also toward facilitating US engagement in the region and supporting regional-order-building efforts, as championed by the United States over the last seven decades since the end of the Second World War.

5. Reinvigorate Multilateral Forums

US participation and US-Japan cooperation in multilateral regional forums, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), need to be reinvigorated. President Trump has never attended the East Asia Summit and only attended the APEC leaders' summit once in 2017. This long string of no-shows has raised doubts around the region about the credibility of US engagement in Asia. This undermines US influence, which is underpinned not just by its military power and economic strength but also by the depth of its cooperation with regional allies and partners. Coordinating US-Japan cooperation at the EAS, APEC, and ADMM+ on issues of shared interest should be a stepping-stone in ending the US retreat from multilateralism. This should include the development of a joint strategy vis-à-vis China in order to deter Chinese unilateralism, bolster its engagement, and encourage it to

act as a constructive regional stakeholder. It should also include coordination to promote regional confidence-building measures, nontraditional security cooperation, promotion of free trade, financial cooperation for infrastructure investment, and environmental and energy cooperation.



The longevity of the US-Japan alliance is thanks to the hard work of officials in both countries to sustain cooperation over the last 60 years. However, given the current strains in the East Asia regional security environment, there is no time for complacency. The tremendous challenges facing the region require a recommitment to cooperation and a more robust and dynamic approach on the part of the two countries, starting with the steps outlined above. Through this approach, the United States and Japan will be able to bolster the sustainability of the alliance bilaterally, lead constructive and effective cooperation multilaterally, and maintain the US-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of East Asian security for the next 60 years.

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East Asia Insights is an occasional newsletter focusing on East Asia regional issues from a Japanese perspective.

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