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Japan: America’s New South Korea?

JAMES E. AUER AND ROBYN LIM

The key issue confronting US-Japan relations is how much Japan can and should do to ensure its own security. During the cold war, Japan was able to purchase its security at minimal cost; indeed, it was frequently criticized in the US Congress for free riding on America’s anti-Soviet posture in the Pacific region. That is no longer possible. Now the United States has more strategic latitude than when it was tied down by countervailing Soviet power. And America is freer to give up on free-riding or feckless allies, as South Korea is discovering. Is Japan—which spends less than 1 percent of GDP on defense—willing to pay increased dues for an alliance that provides it with nuclear and long-range maritime security?

So far, the signs are positive that Tokyo will be able to make the required changes. Notably, the United States and Japan are cooperating in the development of missile defense, which is the primary issue that will help shape the alliance. Japan also has sent elements of its Self-Defense Force to Iraq (thus far in noncombat roles) in support of the US mission there.

All may not be smooth sailing, however. While a congruence of strategic interests still underpins the alliance, those interests are not quite as congruent as they were during the cold war. Moreover, Japan’s security environment has become more volatile. This means Japan will have to make the kind of hard choices that it has hitherto been able to avoid.

JAPAN’S REDUCED LEVERAGE

Japan’s strategic environment is now much less predictable, and thus potentially more dangerous,

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than during the cold war. That global strategic contest meant Japan had no reason to fear that it would be attacked by the Soviet Union in any circumstance short of general war. And general war was highly unlikely: both superpowers knew that the existence of nuclear weapons made a head-to-head collision far too dangerous.

During the cold war, the United States was willing, in the interests of its own security, to provide nuclear and maritime security for Japan. In return, Japan provided the United States with access to bases that could be used for regional purposes. Because the security connection was vital to the interests of both parties, they were able to insulate the security relationship from the frictions that began to develop as the Japanese economy started to boom in the 1960s.

Today’s strategic environment in Asia is very different, not least because America has more strategic choices. Its vital interest, however, remains the same: maintenance of the balance of power on the opposite shore of the Pacific. Since 1952, one of America’s main means of doing so has been the alliance with Japan. But that was not so before, and may not always be so in the future.

For Japan, the maritime basis of its security means that alliance with the dominant maritime power represents optimal security. That was so between 1902 and 1922, and has been so since 1952. But Japan today has less leverage on the alliance than it enjoyed during the cold war, and the United States has more strategic latitude. The United States is developing military technology that shrinks distance and helps reduce the need for allies who might defect in a crisis. And, at the same time, Japan has less weight in the alliance because its economy faltered just as the cold war was ending, and is only now beginning to recover. Moreover,

while America still requires bases in Japan, it does not need them to the degree it did in the past.

The key long-term issue in the management of the US-Japan relationship is China. While China has strategic ambition, Japan has growing strategic anxieties. But the immediate problem for peace and stability in the East Asia-Pacific region is North Korea.

THE "ORPHANED" NEIGHBOR

One of the reasons that Japan's security environment has turned for the worse is that North Korea, having been made an "orphan" by the end of the cold war, has become more dangerous. No longer able to play off Beijing against Moscow, North Korea has preserved its odious regime by developing missiles and weapons of mass destruction as instruments of blackmail and extortion.

In August 1998, North Korea's unannounced launch over the Japanese islands of a three-stage solid-fueled long-range missile, the Taepodong, signaled the end of the days when most Japanese thought they could pursue a head-in-the-sand approach to security.

The Taepodong launch meant that the entire Japanese archipelago was now vulnerable to missile attack from a country that hated

Japan (because of Japan's harsh occupation of the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945) and that also had a long history of state-sponsored terrorism. And by 2002, North Korea was boasting that it had an illegal uranium-enrichment facility.

Some observers claim that the North Korean missile threat to Japan has been exaggerated. They say the missiles represent less of a threat to Japan than when it was targeted by many more Soviet missiles, which were also far more accurate than the North Korean missiles. This is true, but irrelevant. During the cold war Japan had no reason to fear an attack on itself unless general war broke out.

But not long after the cold war ended, North Korea started to open up a gap between the United States and Japan on the vital issue of nuclear security. In fact, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, when visiting Japan in late 2003, felt a need to confirm that the US "nuclear umbrella" would not leak. That was an indication that Japan was growing nervous lest America offer some kind of security guarantee to North Korea that might nullify US guarantees to Japan.

One of the consequences of North Korea's Taepodong launch was that Japan opted to build its own optical reconnaissance satellites. That was partly a victory for domestic Japanese industry, but it was also an indication that Japan might be starting to lose confidence in US nuclear protection.

Moreover, at the end of his tenure, President Bill Clinton was tempted to strike a deal with North Korea that would have seen Pyongyang freeze its long-range missile development, but would have left North Korea's existing missiles in place. This North Korean attempt at alliance busting ended only when prominent Republican voices, such as that of former Defense Department official Richard Armitage, indicated to the Clinton administration that if the party's candidate won the election, the new Republican administration would not honor any deal.

KOIZUMI'S UNILATERALISM

The Bush administration from the start indicated it was not willing to play such games, notably when President Bush included North Korea in the "axis

of evil" in his State of the Union address in January 2002. So North Korean leader Kim Jong-il turned his attention to other ways of trying to

drive wedges into the US-Japan alliance. This time, he came even closer to success when Japan's prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, announced in August 2002 that he would visit Pyongyang.

Koizumi, in announcing his impending visit, presented Washington with a *fait accompli*. He was looking for a distraction from Japan's flagging economy, and wanted a political boost in order to reshuffle his cabinet. To this end, Koizumi saw his opening to Pyongyang as a means of achieving the return of Japanese kidnapped by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s.

Koizumi went ahead with his plans even though he was told by Washington that North Korea had a clandestine highly enriched uranium program. On September 17, 2002, Koizumi held his "historic summit" with Kim. Koizumi also dangled before Pyongyang the prospect of large-scale Japanese aid, in the form of so-called disguised reparations for Japan's occupation of the Korean peninsula from 1910.

It soon became apparent that the "Dear Leader" had miscalculated when he failed to keep alive enough of the kidnapped Japanese to use as future

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pawns. When the news reached Japan that most of the abductees were dead, attitudes hardened.

But Kim did not give up, and May 2004 saw Koizumi back in Pyongyang. With Upper House elections looming in July, Koizumi was looking again for a political boost, hoping to secure the release of relatives of the abductees who had been released in 2002.

When Koizumi reached Pyongyang in May, he did secure the return of five adult children of the Japanese hostages previously released. But he also promised to give North Korea 250,000 tons of rice and \$10 million in medical aid. And he was willing to put up with rude treatment by Kim, including being filmed on North Korean television with the Dear Leader wagging his finger under Koizumi's nose. No doubt, this all played well in both Koreas.

THE SEOUL ALLIANCE UNRAVELS

While Koizumi unwittingly provided the North Koreans the opportunity to drive a wedge between Washington and Tokyo, the US alliance with South Korea has been unraveling as a consequence of the end of the cold war and China's turn to the market. South Korea has been unable to translate its economic supremacy over the north into political leverage. To the contrary, it is bent on appeasement of North Korea. This is out of a mixture of naïveté and fear—fear of the costs of reunification, and fear of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction and conventional arms.

As a consequence of growing interdependence between the Chinese and South Korean economies, South Korea has become a *de facto* ally of China. Thus its value to the United States as an ally has been undermined, and the congruence of strategic interest that underpinned this alliance during the cold war is rapidly eroding.

In early June 2004, the Pentagon told Seoul that it intends, by the end of 2005, to withdraw 12,500 troops from units stationed in South Korea. That decision followed the US decision in May to reassign to Iraq a combat brigade. The Pentagon made no promise that these ground troops would ever return to South Korea.

These moves were triggered in part by operational needs in Iraq. They are also part of global changes in US force structure designed to reduce permanent forward deployments, increase access to overseas facilities, and produce a more mobile and flexible military capable of more rapid deployment operations.

In relation to the Korean peninsula, the Pentagon wants its ground forces removed from their for-

ward-deployed positions across the main invasion routes from North Korea. In these positions, they have become too vulnerable to North Korean rockets and artillery.

But there is more to it than that. Recent US moves in South Korea came also in response to the actions and interests of China and both Koreas. South Korea's increasing criticisms of the US presence, its decision to look to China for strategic security, and its solicitous attitude toward North Korea make nonsense of the US ground presence in South Korea.

Fortunately for South Korea, the United States retains nuclear, maritime, and air power in the Western Pacific that can be used to devastating effect on the Korean peninsula. But the US force structure in South Korea will be increasingly geared to US strategic needs, rather than defense of the invasion corridors north of Seoul. Washington will expect that its reconfigured forces will be available for use in regional contingencies, including Taiwan. Will South Korea permit that? It seems unlikely.

A FOIL TO CHINA

China is East Asia's "rising" power. When the Soviet Union collapsed, China no longer had to worry about Soviet strategic pressure on its northern and western frontiers. Thus China was soon pressing on its maritime frontiers in the East and South China Sea. The collapse of Soviet power also saw the collapse of the *de facto* alignment forged between Washington and Beijing in the early 1970s, when the rapid development of Soviet military power threatened them both.

Today, China and the United States are not enemies. Their economies are increasingly interdependent, and they have some shared strategic interests, including avoiding war and achieving the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. But they are not friends, either. If China were to become dominant in East Asia, it would detract from US security by excluding US military power from the region (or by seeking to do so), and indirectly by its effects on Japan.

There are signs that Japan will assume the geostrategic role of the "new South Korea"—a leverage point against China. Missile defense in particular will transform the US-Japan relationship into a "normal" alliance, taking it in directions not hitherto contemplated.

Japan dithered for years on missile defense, even in the face of the growing missile threat from North Korea, mostly because it feared "offending" China. That was until late 2002, when the United States made it clear that it was going ahead with missile

defense anyway, if necessary without Japan. The subtext was that the Americans were unwilling to leave their forces unprotected in Japan if the means to protect them were being developed and Japan was unwilling to participate.

The pace of US-Japan cooperation has been accelerating since Japan decided in December 2003 to acquire ballistic missile defenses by 2007. Programs to provide initial missile defense systems to Japan are under way, and a Memorandum of Understanding is about to be signed.

Collaboration in missile defense will do much to make the US-Japan alliance “normal” in terms of interoperability for bilateral warfighting—in this case, shooting down missiles that threaten both Japan and US forces stationed in Japan. Moreover, Japan will inevitably become part of the defense of the United States. That is because the systems required for the defense of Japan (such as satellites and space-based sensors that detect the heat plumes from missile launches) will be integrally linked to systems required for the defense of the continental United States.

Hard choices lie ahead. In particular, Japan will have to abandon the self-serving notion that, while it is entitled to participate in collective self-defense (the right of all members of the UN), it chooses not to do so. In the past, this was a device that helped Japan avoid entanglement in America's conflicts, or potential conflicts, in East Asia. Koizumi is currently foreshadowing moves to abandon this interpretation of the constitution. Another hurdle is Japan's arms export policy, which makes cooperation with the US difficult since it prevents the joint development and production of weapons with a foreign country; this ban will have to be lifted if the United States and Japan are to collaborate in missile defense. Japan will also have to amend or reinterpret a 1969 Diet resolution that bans the military use of space. Although Japan protects intelligence reasonably well, new legislation protecting intelligence will also be required.

THE PARTNERSHIP DEEPENS

The United States and Japan were never able to savor their combined efforts in winning the cold war in the Pacific, in part because Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990. The defense relationship had evolved from extremely humble beginnings in the early 1950s, when the United States ordered Japan to rearm and loaned it old military equipment, into a sophisticated high-technology anti-submarine, air-defense partnership in the 1980s. But the relationship suffered a serious setback

when Japan opted out of even token participation in Operation Desert Storm. Although Japan raised taxes and did contribute \$13 billion, its efforts were criticized as checkbook diplomacy in the United States, Europe, and friendly Persian Gulf countries. Stung by criticism, Japan sought closer consultations with the United States. New *Guidelines for Defense Cooperation*, which came about in the latter half of the 1990s, authorized “rear area support,” that is, noncombat Japanese assistance in “safe” areas.

In a very nontypical Japanese “grassroots” campaign, Koizumi came out of nowhere to become prime minister in April 2001 with a promise to reform Japan's economy and end business as usual. Armed with the new *Guidelines*, Koizumi's administration acted quickly following September 11, 2001, and sent Japanese naval tankers and destroyers to the Indian Ocean to support US and British forces in Afghanistan. The dispatch of one of Japan's four Aegis-class destroyers was considered too sensitive initially, but one Aegis ship has now also served. The enabling legislation was extended for two more years in 2003 and Japan's maritime contribution was complemented by the deployment of military transport aircraft and 600-plus Japanese soldiers to Samawah, Iraq, declared to be “safe” enough to receive Japanese noncombat humanitarian assistance. Although these Japanese troops are supposed to be withdrawn if the area becomes dangerous, the presence of Japanese “boots on the ground” near a combat zone is a phenomenon not seen since 1945.

ENDURING INTERESTS

Strategic circumstances change, but interests tend to be enduring. Today, America's vital interest in East Asia is the same as it has been since 1905—to secure a balance of power that suits its interests. Since the Korean War, America's main means of doing so has been alliance with Japan. But that could change.

If Japan proves unwilling to play the role of the “new South Korea,” America might be tempted to pursue its “Perfidious Albion” option—playing off China against Japan. Rising strategic tension between China and Japan, despite their growing economic interdependence, makes it unlikely that the two countries would work together against the United States.

Thus the onus is on Japan to say what it is willing to do if it wishes to continue to enjoy all the benefits of alliance. For Japan, the choice could well be a “normal” alliance—in which it must be willing to fight if necessary—or no alliance at all. ■