47. Toward a New Relationship with Japan

The U.S. government should

- inform the Japanese government that all U.S. military forces will be withdrawn from Japan in five years,
- inform the Japanese government that the mutual security treaty will be terminated in seven years,
- adopt a policy that encourages Japan to take primary responsibility for East Asian stability,
- replace the U.S.-Japanese alliance with a more limited and informal security relationship,
- redeploy approximately 50 percent of the U.S. air and naval units now stationed in Japan to Guam and other U.S. territories in the Central Pacific and demobilize the rest,
- avoid the temptation to use the security commitment as bargaining leverage on trade issues, and
- have as its fundamental goal the creation of a new relationship with Tokyo that treats Japan as a mature and responsible great power.

The U.S. military alliance with Japan no longer serves the best interests of either country. Washington subsidizes Japan's defense at the expense of American taxpayers. That subsidy, which has amounted to more than $900 billion (in 1996 dollars) since the early 1950s, is a powerful incentive for the Japanese government to continue free riding on the U.S. security guarantee. And Japan's much-touted host-nation support of $5 billion a year actually pays only a small fraction of the total cost of the U.S. security commitment.

Even worse, Washington's policy encourages a dependent mentality on the part of the Japanese and enables Tokyo to evade political and military

responsibilities in East Asia even when Japan has important interests at stake. Japanese officials state repeatedly that, in the event of war, Japanese military units would not join U.S. forces in combat operations unless Japan itself were attacked.

U.S. leaders foolishly perpetuate Japan's security dependence. Washington's East Asian policy is held hostage to the exaggerated fears of Japan's neighbors, who oppose a more active military role for Tokyo. A lingering undercurrent of distrust toward Japan in U.S. policy circles has also been a major motive for Washington's "smothering" strategy.

A new policy is needed. It would seek a mature relationship between equals and recognize that Japan, as the principal great power in East Asia, must play a more significant role in the region's security affairs. The United States should withdraw its forces from Japan over the next five years and keep smaller forces based in Guam and other U.S. territories. The U.S.-Japanese alliance ought to be replaced by a more limited, informal security relationship.

The Illusion of Change at the Clinton-Hashimoto Summit

Instead of squarely addressing the need for fundamental change, leaders of both countries have engaged in misleading propaganda offensives to convince their own populations that meaningful change is already taking place. The strategy of fostering such illusions was most evident following the April 1996 summit meeting between President Clinton and Japanese prime minister Ryutaro Hashimoto. Media accounts, manipulated by U.S. and Japanese officials, portrayed the agreements that emerged from the summit as marking a historic change in the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

That portrayal was erroneous. Although the United States agreed to consolidate its military bases on Okinawa, overall U.S. troop levels in Japan will remain the same. There was no hint of an eventual drawdown of those forces, much less that Washington would insist that Japan assume responsibility for its own defense.

The two changes in Tokyo's policy were equally tepid. Japan merely agreed to sell nonlethal supplies to U.S. forces in peacetime; there was no commitment to provide military materiel, nor was there an obligation to provide even nonlethal items in wartime. Tokyo's promise to conduct a review of its defense policy to determine whether there can be greater bilateral cooperation to deal with situations "in the areas surrounding Japan and which will have an important influence on the peace and security of Japan" appears unlikely to produce meaningful changes in the country's

military posture. At most, it might lead to Japanese logistical support for U.S. military operations during an East Asian crisis. Even that meager change is increasingly doubtful. In the months since the summit, Hashimoto and other officials have emphasized that the review will not lead to a lifting of Japan's constitutional ban on involvement in collective defense missions. There is no indication whatsoever that Japanese troops ever intend to fight alongside American forces, unless Japan itself comes under attack. Despite the official and media hype, the summit agreements do not alter Japan's status as a U.S. military dependent.

A new—really new—relationship is needed. The huge demonstrations against the U.S. military bases following the rape of a 12-year-old Okinawa girl by three American soldiers, and public opinion surveys showing that many Japanese respondents—especially those on Okinawa where a vast majority of U.S. military personnel are stationed—now oppose the troop presence, suggest that the security relationship is under stress. The results of a nonbinding referendum in Okinawa on September 8, 1996, in which some 90 percent of those voting endorsed a proposal to reduce the size and number of U.S. bases on the island, confirm that point.

Japan's Evasion of Security Issues

But there is a more fundamental reason to phase out not just the troop presence but the alliance itself. Keeping Japan a U.S. military dependent is not healthy for either country. It perpetuates an expensive and dangerous set of security obligations for the United States while it encourages the Japanese to act as though they can forever evade difficult political and military issues.

The Japanese justification for military inaction is the country's "Peace Constitution," which was virtually imposed by Gen. Douglas MacArthur's occupation government after World War n. Article 9 of that document renounces war and asserts that "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential" will never be maintained. Thus, Japanese officials contend, Japan is precluded from playing an active military role in world affairs.

Whenever Japan's political elite has wanted to pursue a particular policy objective, however, it has been able to find sufficient elasticity in article 9. (For example, in the early 1980s Japan decided to build the naval forces needed to defend the sea lanes out to 1,000 nautical miles from the archipelago.) Conversely, when Tokyo wants to avoid undertaking security responsibilities, the Peace Constitution provides a convenient excuse.

Overcoming Unwarranted Suspicion of Japan

U.S. officials who favor keeping Japan militarily dependent rarely admit publicly that the United States simply does not trust Japan—although a number of indiscreet comments in recent years confirm that such distrust exists. Instead, they contend that any significant Japanese rearmament or a more assertive policy by Tokyo would alarm Japan's East Asian neighbors, thereby producing a regional arms race and dangerous instability.

The other East Asian nations do fear a resurgent Japan and want the United States to maintain a large military presence to contain potential Japanese power. Although it would be unwise to discount the apprehension with which Japan is still regarded throughout East Asia, the specter of a larger Japanese military role may be less traumatic than it might at first appear. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Japan could probably protect its security interests with a modest increase in defense spending, say to the level of 1.5 percent of gross domestic product. Only the most paranoid would be alarmed by a buildup of that magnitude. Moreover, the East Asian countries have some cause to worry about China's ambitions in the coming years and might not be all that averse to a stronger Japan that could help constrain those ambitions.

Even if regional leaders do not prove to be that farsighted, both East Asian and U.S. officials need to outgrow the simplistic assumption that Japan's military role must inevitably be one of extremes—either the rampant expansionism of six decades ago or the self-effacing dependency of the post–World War II era. It is probable that modern, democratic Japan would play a prudent role somewhere between those two extremes. In other words, Japan would act as a typical prosperous, conservative great power in the international system.

Moreover, the pertinent question from the standpoint of U.S. foreign policy should not be whether the status quo is more comfortable for the regional states but whether it is in the best interests of the American people. It is difficult to justify preserving expensive and dangerous military commitments indefinitely merely to spare Japan and its neighbors the difficulties of confronting and overcoming old animosities. Washington cannot permit its policy in East Asia to be held hostage by the ghosts of World War II.

Washington needs to encourage Japan to assume a more responsible security role. America's overall objective should be a reasonably stable balance of power among the principal East Asian nations. An activist Japan is an essential part, indeed the single most important component,

of that balance-of-power system. In particular, Japan is the only country—other than the United States—that will be capable of being a strategic counterweight to China in the coming decades.

The Current Relationship Is Unsustainable

U.S. policymakers ignore mounting evidence that a security relationship between America as patron and Japan as dependent is not sustainable in the long term. By clinging to the status quo, American leaders risk an abrupt and nasty rupture of the alliance that could poison American-Japanese relations and create the dangerous power vacuum in East Asia that Washington has tried so hard to prevent.

There are storm warnings in both countries. The outcry against the U.S. military presence following the rape incident in Okinawa and the results of the September referendum on the U.S. bases are only the most recent and spectacular examples of rising Japanese annoyance. Anger about escalating U.S. demands on the trade front is another, albeit less visible, manifestation.

Sentiment in the United States toward Japan has likewise become more confrontational. An especially lethal danger will occur if Americans who are angry about trade matters begin to link that issue to Japanese free riding on defense. There are indications that such a linkage is already taking place, as evidenced by the widely discussed *Foreign Affairs* article by Chalmers Johnson and E. B. Keehn that appeared in the summer of 1995.

Public discontent with alleged Japanese misdeeds on trade issues will eventually produce pressure to adopt the suggestion of Johnson, Keehn, and others to threaten the withdrawal of the U.S. military shield as bargaining "leverage." American advocates of a confrontational trade policy will not be content indefinitely to subsidize the defense of a nation that they believe engages in unfair trade practices. Even Takakazu Kuriyama, Japan's former ambassador to the United States, has stated that the greatest danger to the alliance is "spillover" from economic conflict.

The outbreak of an armed conflict somewhere in East Asia that did not include an attack on Japan could also fracture the alliance. Japanese officials have made it clear that their country would merely hold America's coat while U.S. forces intervened to restore the peace. Johnson and Keehn accurately judge the probable consequences of such inaction in the case of a conflict in Korea: "The Pentagon should ponder the specter of Japanese warships standing idly by while the United States takes major

risks to defend South Korea. Popular support in the United States for any defense of Japan would instantly vanish."

That scenario underscores the inherent fragility of the U.S.-Japanese security relationship. Its continued viability is contingent on the alliance's never being put to the test by a military conflict in East Asia. U.S. policymakers will of course argue that the principal purpose of the alliance is to deter such a conflict in the first place. That is undoubtedly true, and the strategic partnership probably does make the outbreak of combat in the region less likely. Nevertheless, it is dubious wisdom to invest *all* of one's hopes in the infallibility of deterrence. To be viable, an alliance must also be of unquestioned value to both parties if deterrence fails and a war has to be waged. An arrangement in which one party assumes most of the costs in blood and treasure while the other party reaps the benefits is unstable as well as unjust.

U.S. leaders need to foster a U.S.-Japanese relationship based on the realities of the post-Cold War world, not a bygone era in which Japan lacked the economic strength or the political confidence to play an assertive, independent role in international affairs and the emotional wounds of World War n were still fresh. The new goal should be a mature relationship between equals—a relationship that recognizes that Japan is a great power in every respect.

Toward a New Relationship

Several steps must be taken to implement substantive changes. First, the United States should inform Japan that it intends to withdraw its forces from Japanese territory over the next five years and that it will renounce the security treaty two years later. At that point, Japan will be expected to provide entirely for its own defense. Washington should implement its withdrawal strategy without rancor and state explicitly that the move is not motivated by traditional complaints about burden sharing or by the more recent tensions over trade disputes. Under no circumstances should the United States use the security commitment as a bargaining chip. That approach would be a blueprint for Japanese resentment, and the damage to U.S.-Japanese relations could last decades.

Second, Washington should indicate to Tokyo that it no longer objects to Japan's assuming a more active political and military posture in East Asia. Quite the contrary, U.S. officials ought to adopt the position that, as the principal democratic great power in the region, Japan has a moral

obligation to help stabilize East Asia and contain disruptive or expansionist threats.

Third, discussions should begin immediately about a new, more limited security relationship. Japanese and American security interests are likely to overlap in the coming decades, and it is reasonable to explore avenues of cooperation in those areas where there is a sufficient convergence of interests. That cooperation should not, however, take the form of a new alliance. An ongoing security dialogue and occasional joint military exercises would be more appropriate. Elaborate, formal treaty commitments are a bad idea in general. They lock a nation into commitments that may make sense under one set of conditions but become dubious or even counterproductive when conditions change.

The United States has some important East Asian interests and cannot be indifferent to the region's fate. No reasonable person would suggest that the United States withdraw its forces to Seattle and San Diego and adopt a Fortress America strategy. But having some interests in the region and being willing to make a contribution to its stability are a far cry from volunteering to be point man in every crisis. America can still protect its core interests with a significantly reduced military presence based in Guam, Wake, Midway, and other locations in the central and west-central Pacific. There is no need to have large numbers of forward-deployed forces, much less units to serve as automatic tripwires if even a minor conflict erupts.

The United States should be the balancer of last resort, not the intervenor of first resort, in East Asia's security equation. And the most crucial step in adopting that strategy is to devolve primary regional security responsibilities to Japan, the region's leading power.

Suggested Readings

Bandow, Doug. "The Japan-U.S. Arrangement Is Unfair to Both." *Asian Wall Street Journal,* September 10, 1996.

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Johnson, Chalmers, and E. B. Keehn. "The Pentagon's Ossified Strategy." *Foreign Affairs* 74 (July-August 1995).

Layne, Christopher. "Less Is More: Minimal Realism in East Asia." *National Interest* 43 (Spring 1996).

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