



The Revival of the U.S.-Japanese Alliance

By Dan Blumenthal

After a period of decline, security ties between the United States and Japan have been revitalized by both countries' responses to the threats of terrorism and a nuclear North Korea. The invigorated alliance has also taken significant steps to deal with the rise of China as a military power, including the coordination of security policy, missile defense cooperation, and U.S. support of Tokyo's efforts to assert its interests in the Asia Pacific region. U.S. policymakers should welcome these developments and continue to support Japan's emergence as a strong American ally.

The new U.S.-Japanese statement of “Common Strategic Goals” adopted on February 19 capped a decade of deepening security ties between the two countries. Indeed, the statement is intended to serve as a guideline for the comprehensive transformation of the alliance. While the upgrading of the alliance serves a number of Tokyo's strategic purposes, there is no mistaking the fact that Japan has decided to join the United States in its grand strategy of checking China's great-power ambitions. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Tokyo has taken advantage of the U.S.-led war on terrorism, Washington's encouragement of Japanese efforts to bolster its defense capabilities, and the North Korean nuclear standoff to assert a defense posture commensurate to its stature in the international community.

While the Bush administration has worked to improve the tone of official U.S. relations with China, its real effort in relationship building has been focused on Japan. Washington has pressed Japan for closer bilateral consultation and coordination, defense-industrial cooperation, and the adjustment of prohibitions against the projection of military power.¹ Prime Minister Koizumi in turn has steadfastly supported the war on terror-

ism, including the dispatching of Japanese military forces to support operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, and decided to build a ballistic missile defense system that will necessitate greater U.S.-Japanese strategic and operational integration. While Washington's attention has been primarily focused on the Middle East, Tokyo has worked to keep the United States in the “great game” for influence in Asia.

A Decade Adrift

With the end of the Cold War, the U.S.-Japanese alliance lost its bearings. Protectionist sentiment in Washington was matched in Tokyo by nationalistic resentment of its sometimes overbearing alliance partner. Moreover, American urges to cash in on the post-Cold War “peace dividend” fed fears in Japan that the United States would end its security commitment to the Asia Pacific region and its alliance with Japan. The nadir of U.S.-Japanese relations was marked by Tokyo's decision to refrain from providing anything but financial support for the 1991 Persian Gulf War and Japan's denial of U.S. requests for intelligence and logistical support during the 1993–94 North Korean nuclear crisis.

Two incidents paved the way for the alliance's recovery. First, Japanese concern over China's

Dan Blumenthal (dblumenthal@aei.org) is a resident fellow at AEI.

military build-up intensified in March 1996 after China attempted to intimidate Taiwan by test-firing ballistic missiles off the Taiwanese coast, some of which landed within sixty kilometers of Yonaguni, Japan's westernmost populated island. Japanese policymakers had to face the fact that China was serious about developing capabilities to fight a war with the United States over Taiwan. Japanese strategists had to begin planning for noncombatant evacuations—there are an estimated tens of thousands of Japanese living on Taiwan—and to protect Japanese sea lanes and sea access. Even more challenging, Japanese defense planners had to begin thinking about the role Japan would play should the United States ask Tokyo for assistance in a Taiwan conflict.

This reassessment resulted in the 1996 Joint Declaration between President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, Japan agreed to provide the United States with logistical support during “regional contingencies.” The United States and Japan also drafted a new set of defense guidelines to shape the alliance. The new guidelines allowed for more strategic and operational coordination, and stated that the alliance covers “situations in the areas surrounding Japan.” The use of the word “situations” provided Japan more leeway to define when it would provide the United States with military support. When China criticized this agreement as a step toward Japanese support of America's security commitment to Taiwan, neither the United States nor Japan disputed that interpretation.

Japan suffered a second shock in August 1998 when North Korea fired a three-stage Taepo-dong 1 missile over the Tohoku region of Japan's main island. This incident forced the Japanese public to acknowledge the precariousness of their country's strategic position: in the face of the North Korean threat, the United States was the only country able or willing to come to Tokyo's defense. The North Korean danger was further demonstrated in early 1999 when Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) patrol ships fired warning shots at suspected North Korean spy boats in Japan's territorial waters. In response to these incidents, Japan announced its intention to launch an independent reconnaissance satellite and to partner with the United States in establishing a Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system.

Despite these important measures, closer U.S.-Japanese security cooperation in the 1990s faced

several obstacles. The most important of these was mutual ambivalence about China. In the first half of the decade, Japan considered cooperation with China as an alternative to perceived American bullying on trade and other issues. Many analysts believe that as U.S.-Japanese relations frayed, China missed the opportunity to supplant the United States as Japan's ally in the region. Then, in the second half of the 1990s, the Clinton administration sought a “strategic partnership” with China, which many in Japan viewed as downgrading the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

These policy inconsistencies reflected the difficulty of both articulating national interests and assessing Chinese intentions. Both countries had powerful constituencies that subscribed to the view that locking China into international security, political, and economic regimes would ameliorate Chinese regional ambitions and perhaps even transform Beijing's dictatorial system of government. But, as China continued to develop capabilities to project naval power and a substantial missile force despite these accommodating policies, Japan was ready for a reevaluation of its defense posture.

Charting a New Course: 9/11 and Afterward

The incremental changes in U.S.-Japanese relations during the late 1990s set the stage for Prime Minister Koizumi's decision to move Japan more definitively into a tighter alliance with the United States. Soon after taking office in April 2001, Koizumi concluded that the best route for Japan to assume its rightful role on the international stage was through closer U.S.-Japanese security cooperation. Two events created the opportunity for him to pursue such an ambitious agenda.

First, Koizumi's response to the 9/11 terror attacks was decisive: he announced his support for America's exercise of its inherent right to self-defense and secured Diet approval for new laws enabling the dispatch of logistics ships to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, escorted by Japanese AEGIS-equipped destroyers. During Operation Enduring Freedom, MSDF ships transported fuel supplies to a multinational coalition of navies and the Air Self-Defense Force flew a number of transport missions to Diego Garcia and Guam. Koizumi demonstrated that Japan was ready to conduct military operations out of area.

Then, in December 2003, Koizumi took the even more controversial step of supporting the U.S.-led war on Iraq when he dispatched ground troops to Iraq for noncombatant, reconstruction roles. Though Koizumi approached the issue cautiously, waiting for the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1511—which authorized a multinational peacekeeping mission in Iraq—Japan proved itself willing to support U.S.-led missions even when an international consensus did not exist.

Koizumi had two overlapping goals. His response to Operation Enduring Freedom demonstrated that Japan was a responsible international player ready for membership in the UN Security Council—which Beijing opposes. The response to Operation Iraqi Freedom demonstrated that Japan was a loyal ally to the United States even when Washington was internationally isolated.

While Japan sought to emphasize its importance to American policymakers, the second North Korean nuclear crisis underscored Japan's reliance on the United States to overcome its strategic vulnerabilities. The North Korean regime's disclosure of its secret uranium enrichment program in October 2002 initiated a new crisis on the Korean Peninsula in which Japan had much to lose but little independent ability to affect the outcome. When the Six-Party Talks to address Korea's nuclear program commenced in August 2003, Japan depended upon U.S. support to keep its two main concerns—North Korea's No-dong medium-range ballistic missiles and abduction of thirteen Japanese citizens since the 1970s—on the agenda.

North Korea's medium-range ballistic missile stockpile is particularly troubling for Tokyo. The medium-range missiles are Japan's gravest concern; the United States is primarily threatened by North Korea's nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile ambitions, while South Korea is focused on the North Korean conventional build-up on the demilitarized zone. Consequently, American support for Japanese interests in the Six-Party Talks has been critical to the Koizumi cabinet, and has further consolidated the basis for strengthened security ties.

The U.S.-Japanese Alliance and China

The changes Japan made to its defense policy in response to the war on terrorism and the North Korean crisis set the stage for Koizumi to adjust Tokyo's strategy to deal with its most vexing long-term security

challenge: the growth of Chinese power. Japan has established the legal and policy framework for responding to regional contingencies such as a Chinese attack on Taiwan, strengthened U.S.-Japanese military integration through missile defense cooperation, asserted its maritime interests, and stood up to Chinese bullying on Taiwan.

Laying the Legal Framework. A priority for the Koizumi cabinet has been to revise Japanese crisis response procedures in order to make it easier for Tokyo to work with Washington in any future conflict. The Anti-Terror Legislation passed by the Japanese Diet in October 2001 freed the Japanese self-defense forces to operate outside of East Asia. By crossing this Rubicon, Japan will be able to work with the United States in the future to maintain control of vital sea lines of communication, particularly in the event of a conflict involving maritime access to the Middle East. As China arms the Iranian regime with anti-ship missiles and expands its naval presence into the Indian Ocean, this is an area that will have greater importance in the future.

The three national emergency laws that the Diet passed in July 2003 give the prime minister and his cabinet the authority to respond to a state of armed attack or anticipated attack with emergency measures subject to ex post facto approval by the Diet. These measures have removed restrictions on the Self-Defense Forces that would have made them ineffective in the event of a crisis.

In addition, Koizumi has linked a comprehensive defense policy review to the progress of the U.S. Department of Defense's Global Posture Review. By simultaneously undertaking a National Defense Program Outline (NDPO) and a bilateral U.S.-Japanese Defense Policy Review Initiative, Tokyo has shown uncharacteristic initiative in alliance policy planning. The December 2004 NDPO took the unprecedented step of mentioning China as a potential threat: "China . . . is attempting to expand its sphere of maritime activity while driving the modernization of its nuclear and missile forces as well as naval and air forces. Japan needs to pay attention to these trends."² This concern will be reflected in the U.S. Global Posture Review and Quadrennial Defense Review.

It also appears likely that Koizumi will codify Japan's more assertive role in the alliance through a constitutional amendment supported by a forthcoming Japanese House of Representatives Research Commission report

endorsing the amendment of war-renouncing Article 9 of Japan's constitution. While both Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the opposition Democratic Party of Japan agree that Japanese forces should be able to use force in their own defense, a more thorny issue to resolve will be that of Japanese participation in "collective self-defense." This will be an important issue in 2005, as Japan's inability to participate in collective self-defense has been a traditional justification for ignoring its alliance responsibilities.

Plugging into Missile Defense. The decision that may have the greatest long-term impact on Japan's China strategy is Tokyo's plan to acquire a missile defense system that is interoperable with Washington's. The plan calls for upper and lower BMD systems—the Navy Theater Wide (NTW) system that employs the AEGIS combat system (Japan already has four AEGIS destroyers and is planning to acquire two more) and an upgraded SM-3 as its interceptor missile. Japan will also acquire PAC 3 anti-ballistic missile system for lower-tier protection. The layered approach mirrors U.S. missile defense plans and policies.³

Japan's decision to acquire the "made in America" ballistic missile defense has even greater strategic than operational significance. To make the BMD system effective, Japan and the United States will have to take a number of measures to harmonize plans and procedures at both the strategic and operational levels. Defense-industrial cooperation on laser technologies for Boost Phase Intercept systems will require Japan to relax its prohibition on exporting arms. The move from a categorical ban to a case-by-case review process will open the door to further U.S.-Japanese defense industry cooperation.

Moreover, as Japan expert Christopher Hughes points out, because the Japanese BMD system will rely heavily on the U.S. Defense Support system of satellites and the U.S. Space Based Infrared System for detection of missile launches, the United States and Japan will have to enter into closer command and control arrangements and develop interoperable systems through which intelligence can flow.⁴

In addition, once Japan acquires the NTW system, chances are good that the United States will call upon Japan to deploy its seaborne assets to fill information and coverage gaps to support missions not directly related to the defending Japan, such as the defense of

Taiwan. Given the short time frames involved in a decision to intercept a missile, drawn out security deliberations by policymakers will be impossible. Military personnel will have to make on-the-spot decisions to activate the system without necessarily deciphering whether the missile being intercepted is targeted at Japan, another U.S. ally, or at the U.S. homeland.

The United States and Japan will thus have to develop closely coordinated contingency plans that are based on real life scenarios—including a Chinese attack on Taiwan. China's strong resistance to U.S.-Japanese missile defense cooperation stems more from anxiety over the strategic implications of the system than the actual capability that the system provides. As China specialist Tom Christensen has pointed out, China's has been deeply fearful that Japan would acquire just such a capability. The Navy Theater Wide system, Christensen points out, "would, if effective, have a footprint that could cover the island of Taiwan."⁵

Though the Koizumi administration was careful to frame its missile defense plans as a defense against North Korean missiles, China has not bought this argument. Chinese defense minister Cao Gangchuan told his Japanese counterpart Shigeru Ishiba that a missile defense system "could undermine the region's military balance and trigger a new arms race."⁶ Chinese analysts know that the NTW is effective against its long-range ballistic missiles. And, if Taiwan acquires the BMD and command, control, communications, intelligence surveillance, and reconnaissance packages that the United States has made available to it, integration when needed with Japan and the United States will be relatively easy.

Japan's BMD acquisition complicates Beijing's strategy. China's military modernization program is driven by overlapping goals: coercing Taiwan into unification with the People's Republic, preventing an effective U.S. intervention in the Taiwan Strait, and sowing doubt about the credibility of U.S. security commitments in Asia. In the case of Japan, China's ballistic missile arsenal can hit U.S. military bases in Japan. Chinese strategists want Japan to think twice before supporting the United States in the defense of Taiwan in the short term or other missions in the long term. Japan has responded to Chinese missile force modernization by acquiring the very thing that Beijing most fears: the capability to assist in the defense of Taiwan.

Beijing will almost certainly try to overcome the challenge posed by a Japanese missile defense system. It can swamp the system with more warheads, develop more long-range cruise missiles, or even up the ante by adding to its nuclear arsenal. Tokyo's growing record of unilateral action, however, indicates that it will not be cowed by Beijing.

Unilateral Measures towards the East China Sea and Taiwan. The close Bush-Koizumi relationship and the upgrading of the alliance has given Tokyo the confidence to take unilateral measures to counter Chinese ambitions as well. Japan has asserted itself in the East China Sea and incrementally improved its relationship with Taiwan despite Beijing's protests.

The East China Sea issue emerged in 2004 as the most visible field of rivalry between Japan and China. Last year, Chinese surveillance and reconnaissance vessels conducted over thirty illegal incursions into Japanese territorial waters, culminating in a November infiltration by a Chinese nuclear submarine. These vessels have been surveying submerged gas fields on the floor of the East China Sea, which China began to exploit in the first half of 2004 despite Japanese protests. This dispute has prompted Japan to move to replace its aging F-4 fighters in Okinawa with upgraded F-15s. Also, in November, the Japanese Defense Agency drafted operational plans to deploy 55,000 troops, as well as planes, warships, and submarines in the event of an invasion of the Nansei Islands southwest of Kyushu and Okinawa.

Japan also continues to conduct unofficial relations with Taiwan, which the PRC regards as provocations. Japan's decision to leave open the option of assisting in the defense of Taiwan is a function of its economic, historic, and cultural ties to the island as well as hard-headed strategic calculations: Japanese strategists are concerned about the potential loss of control over vital sea lines of communication.

It is in this context that Japan's recent granting of a visa to former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui—the *bête noire* of Beijing—should be understood. President Lee represents a generation of Taiwanese who speak fluent Japanese and have close ties to the Japanese political establishment. The ROC-Japan Parliamentary Council, led by political power player Takeo Hiranuma, helped arrange Lee's visit to Japan in late September 2004. It was a point of national pride

that Japan did not back down in the face of Chinese protests.

Taiwan has been pressing for closer military and political relations with Japan with some success. Koizumi and acting secretary-general of the LDP, Shinzo Abe, another Japanese power broker, represent a new generation of Japanese politicians more amenable to close ties with Taiwan. Though Washington and Tokyo still believe that official trilateral defense planning is beyond the art of the possible, Japan has recognized the need for some sort of coordination with Taiwanese security officials.

The Use of History: Building Public Support and Muting Chinese Resistance

In fashioning his China strategy, Koizumi had to both build public support and overcome Chinese pressure. Koizumi has accomplished these dual goals by skillfully turning the Achilles heel of Japan's China policy—the "history card"—into political advantage. Koizumi always knew that his campaign promise to visit the Yasukuni Shrine would be controversial in Sino-Japanese relations. What he has since discovered is that historical symbolism can serve to divert attention from his more significant reorientation of Japanese strategy.

In August 2001, Koizumi made his first annual pilgrimage as prime minister to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Japan's 2.5 million war dead, including over a thousand convicted World War II war criminals. Since then, Chinese media and official statements have given inordinate attention to this annual event, and meetings between Koizumi and his Chinese counterparts have been dominated by arguments over the shrine. Chinese President Hu Jintao has stated that bilateral relations will stagnate until Prime Minister Koizumi changes his policy on visiting it.

This state of affairs satisfies Koizumi's purposes. Because the Chinese leadership continues to emphasize this symbolic issue, Koizumi's substantive reforms of Japan's defense posture have received far less criticism than they otherwise would. Indeed, China has overplayed its hand by allowing Japan-bashing to boil over within the Chinese populace.

At the August 2004 Asian Cup soccer final in Beijing, Chinese fans booed the Japanese team and fans, threw objects at them, and unfurled banners with anti-Japanese messages at stadiums. After the game, Chinese

fans smashed the window of a limousine that was carrying a senior Japanese diplomat and burned flags outside of Japan's embassy. This incident fueled increasingly negative perceptions of China in Japan, and some Japanese questioned whether the Chinese could be a responsible host of the 2008 Olympics if they "could not separate politics and nationalism from sports."⁷ The domestic political environment was amenable to Koizumi's more muscular approach to China.

Policy Implications

East Asia's international politics would not be unfamiliar to nineteenth century European statesmen. Security dilemmas abound as each country eyes its neighbors' military capabilities and strategic intentions with suspicion. The region appears to be undergoing a strategic transformation similar to that which swept through Europe at the turn of the twentieth century: great powers are competing for influence while alliance interests and obligations are being explicitly delineated.

After experimenting with strategies of accommodation towards China throughout the 1990s, Japan has chosen to seek balance against China's growing military power by tightening its alliance with the United States. Likewise, the Bush administration's strengthening of its alliance with Tokyo should be viewed as a success with long-term strategic implications. A stronger alliance with Japan clearly benefits the United States in its long-term competition for influence with China. The strength of the U.S.-Japanese condominium was demonstrated when Washington and Tokyo led the response to the December 2004 tsunami disaster in Asia.

However, the United States cannot take sustained Japanese support of a stronger alliance for granted. Beijing is hypersensitive about closer U.S.-Japanese ties—witness its strong criticism of the final "Statement of Common Strategic Objectives" that merely called for a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue. Beijing will not only take military countermeasures against the U.S.-Japanese BMD system, it will also continue its charm offensive towards East Asia with economic inducements and increasingly skilled diplomacy. Beijing will also either try to isolate Japan as an American running dog or try to woo Japan away—China has already surpassed the United States as Japan's largest trading partner.

In response to these risks, Washington must carefully nurture the alliance by building public support within Japan. The U.S. government should make it clear to the Japanese public that it does not view their country simply as a base for adventurism. Washington must also develop greater awareness of and appropriate support for Tokyo's independent strategic concerns.

As it works to build sustained support for the alliance, the United States should continue to push Japan in the direction of a more assertive security posture. The first order priority should be closer trilateral security coordination between the U.S., Japanese, and Taiwanese security establishments. With Japan as the building block, Australia and India should be brought into a structure that addresses the challenges posed by China's security policy. Japan's "normalization" within the framework of a broader community of like-minded nations, will reassure the region that Japan does not intend to seek hegemony. And, most importantly for regional security, if China faces a grouping of countries willing to check its ambitions, it may be convinced that military aggrandizement is a strategic dead end.

Notes

1. Aaron L. Friedberg, "U.S. Strategy in Northeast Asia: Short and Long-Term Challenges," in *U.S. Strategy in the Asia-Pacific Region*, edited by Wilson Lee, Robert M. Hathaway, and William M. Wise (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 21.
2. Foreign Press Center of Japan, "Cabinet Approves New National Defense Program Outline and Midterm Defense Program," press release (available at www.fpcj.jp/e/shiryō/jb/0458.html; accessed February 11, 2005).
3. Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Re-emergence as a "Normal" Military Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 109–110.
4. *Ibid.*, 112–113.
5. Thomas J. Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance and the Security Dilemma in East Asia" *International Security* 23, no. 4 (1999): 66.
6. Kyodo News Service, "China Slams Missile Defense Plans," September 4, 2003, Taiwan Security Research, (available at taiwansecurity.org/News/2003/KN-090403.htm; accessed February 14, 2005).
7. Conversation with Japanese political analyst, whose name is withheld by mutual agreement, February 8, 2005.