



Japan: A Liberal, Nationalistic Defense Transformation

By Chris Griffin and Dan Blumenthal

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's electoral triumph in September 2005 occurred one year before his planned departure from Japan's political scene. What will the future hold for the U.S.-Japanese alliance as the two countries attempt to build upon the major achievements under Koizumi's leadership? The key to pushing the alliance forward will be to learn the right lessons from Japan's participation in the global war on terror and to implement the agreements reached this year under the bilateral "2+2" framework. As long as the United States continues in this direction, it will reinforce Japan's development as a liberal democratic power that seeks to implement an assertive foreign policy in partnership with Washington.

The September 11 elections in Japan gave Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi a mandate for political and economic reform while validating his new, more open style of Japanese politics. Koizumi succeeded in breaking the traditional factions within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and in crushing the immediate prospects of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan. While Koizumi's assertive defense and foreign policies did not factor heavily in the campaign, his impressive electoral victory has broad implications for Japan's strategic trajectory.

The key to Koizumi's victory was that he successfully framed the election as a referendum on his plans for postal reform, which came to symbolize his broader economic and political reform agenda. In making the election about reform, Koizumi touched a popular desire to see Japan emerge from its economic doldrums and take what many Japanese see as its rightful place in the regional and international order. While specific Koizumi foreign policies do not poll well—the unpopular deployment of troops to Iraq is a case in point—the Japanese public is clearly behind

Koizumi's vision of a Japan that is a leading power in Asia and a major global player.

This task is all the more urgent given China's rapid acquisition of economic, military, and political power. Tokyo does not want to be relegated to playing second fiddle to Beijing, especially as the Chinese government promotes a regional order that excludes the United States. Moreover, while many Japanese are still wary of an assertive foreign policy, they realize that assertiveness is the price to be paid if Japan is to become a "normal" country.

Koizumi's attempt to build a "normal" Japan rests on two pillars: reforming the political economy and strengthening the alliance relationship with the United States. While many observers read the latter objectives as Japan's "nationalistic remilitarization," the truth is more complicated: Japan is espousing a liberal nationalism that will require it to become less insular on the security front just as it opens up its political and economic systems to greater competition.

Japan's alliance with the United States is its route to an assertive foreign policy—it reassures both the Japanese public and the region that Japan is not again returning to its old, bad ways. Moreover, the transformation of the alliance requires Tokyo to open up its technological and security

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complexes to greater bilateral collaboration. Japan must be willing to share its strategic and operational intentions and engage in less techno-nationalistic industrial policies. Transformation thus must be accompanied by liberalization: just as Koizumi tantalized his public with a path to political and economic reform, the deepening of defense ties with Washington must lead to a true partnership with the American and allied defense establishments.

Koizumi and President George W. Bush laid the groundwork for a transformed alliance early in their respective tenures. Japan has dispatched Self Defense Forces (SDF) troops in support of Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and committed to cooperative missile defense with the United States. Japan has also reoriented its strategic policies, memorialized in the 2004 *National Defense Program Guideline* and the February and October 2005 “2+2” statements between the U.S. secretaries of defense and state and their Japanese counterparts. But while a strategic vision for a new U.S.-Japanese alliance has been articulated, the hard work of implementation has only begun.

The alliance faces several major challenges over the coming year: learning the right lessons from Japan’s participation in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, implementing an agreement that repositions U.S. Forces in Japan (USFJ) in a way that enhances interoperability between the two armed forces, and overcoming the organizational, fiscal, and legal barriers to a more effective alliance. A major question is whether Koizumi will use the political capital earned by his electoral victory to implement a far-reaching reorientation of Japan’s foreign policy and defense policy.

A Record of Success: The U.S.-Japanese Alliance, 2001–2005

The close partnership between Koizumi and Bush has seen them through myriad crises, including the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States, the September 2002 admission by North Korea that it had conducted a secret uranium enrichment program and abducted Japanese citizens, and the difficult process of rebuilding Afghanistan and Iraq after the wars in those countries.

Throughout this period, Bush and Koizumi supported each other’s foreign policies. Washington has closely coordinated its position on the North Korean crisis and the ongoing six party talks with Tokyo, while the Japanese government has consistently supported U.S. policy in the

war on terrorism, including dispatching SDF troops in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Just as important, Bush has stood by Koizumi in the face of regional opposition to Japan’s reorientation of its foreign and defense policies.

Despite the impressive track record in recent U.S.-Japanese relations, the alliance will face additional hurdles in the next year as Koizumi approaches the September 2006 conclusion of his tenure as the president of the LDP and, consequently, prime minister of Japan. Moreover, the crisis atmosphere that followed the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is evaporating, as the international community returns to its usual sense of complacency. However, Tokyo recognizes that it lives in a dangerous neighborhood and that reality will force its leadership to continue along the path of assertiveness.

Japan must also contend with the domestic political fallout of its decisions to deploy out-of-area in the war on terrorism. The Japanese public is growing weary of the ongoing deployment of the Ground Self Defense Forces (GSDF) in Iraq.

Learning the Right Lessons from the War on Terror

Japan’s role in the war on terror, especially Operation Enduring Freedom, was a major step in its taking on a greater security role. Since December 2002, Japan has maintained a flotilla of logistical support ships and Aegis-equipped destroyers of the Maritime Self Defense Forces (MSDF) to refuel and supply the U.S. and coalition ships operating in the Indian Ocean as a part of OEF.

The Japanese ships in the Indian Ocean are directly supporting a wartime coalition operation that has captured large quantities of weapons, smuggled drugs, and traffickers.¹ This logistical support has increased the operational capabilities of coalition forces. But for some influential Japanese critics even these support operations have been a bridge too far; in their view Japan should have limited itself to humanitarian aid and reconstruction assistance in Afghanistan.² Other Koizumi opponents argue that Japan is violating its constitution by operating its Aegis radar in the proximity of American ships, as the shared situational awareness could permit a prohibited act of collective self-defense.

These arguments have been even more pointed when directed at the Japanese operation in Iraq. Just as the MSDF mission in the Indian Ocean has shattered taboos and established a central role for Japan in coalition

operations, the decision by Prime Minister Koizumi to send troops to Iraq after the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1511 in October 2003 broke new ground. For almost two years, Japanese Ground Self Defense Force troops have been stationed in the southern Iraqi city of Samawah to provide humanitarian and reconstruction assistance.

Although Japanese troops have participated in UN Peacekeeping Operations since 1992, OIF was a new and riskier type of mission—a fact brought home by the slaying of two Japanese diplomats in Iraq in November 2003. Under the awkwardly titled Law Concerning Special Measures on Humanitarian and Reconstruction Assistance, the Japanese troops in Iraq play a strictly noncombatant role in “noncombat zones,” which Koizumi later tautologically defined during Diet question time as “the area where the SDF is carrying out its activities.”³

The Ground Self Defense Force deployment to Iraq has laid bare the problems of a still officially pacifist Japan. Although the Japanese troops were provided with some small arms, their strict rules of engagement and strong pressure to avoid casualties have in practice rendered them unable to defend themselves.⁴ Japanese forces have consequently relied upon Dutch, British, and Australian troops to defend them against insurgent attacks. The GSDF’s actual humanitarian and reconstruction missions have been greatly hampered by these political restrictions. Not surprisingly, GSDF morale has suffered as the troops in Iraq are unable to carry out their humanitarian mission while they are humiliated by relying on the protection of others.

It now appears that by mid-2006, British and Australian troops will have pulled out of Al-Muthanna province as they conclude their training missions for the Iraqi army troops there and hand over security operations to them. Rather than depend on the unproven Iraqis, the Japanese SDF force is aiming to synchronize its withdrawal from Iraq with that of the UK-Australian troops over a three-month period. Japan will have to use the Iraq mission as a baseline for future out-of-area missions, with a public demanding an honest assessment of the costs and benefits.

One senior Japan Defense Agency official summarized this problem succinctly when he described the primary lesson of Iraq: “It isn’t worth it.”⁵ The danger is that this official’s response will catch on when the Japanese consider the political costs of Japan’s GSDF operations in Iraq in light of their limited effectiveness.

To complicate matters, even without restrictive rules of engagement, the GSDF does not yet have the capabilities to conduct joint or combined operations. If Japan is to make out-of-area operations a permanent feature of its security posture, it faces the dual challenge of enhancing its coalition interoperability while at the same time easing legal restrictions on operating with other militaries.

Transforming the Alliance

Since its launch in December 2003, the U.S.-Japanese Security Consultative Committee—commonly known as the “2+2” meetings, between the U.S. secretaries of state and defense and their Japanese counterparts—has undertaken a comprehensive review of the two countries’ national strategies as well as the roles, missions, and force structures of their armed forces. In this past year, the “2+2” meetings reached a pair of landmark agreements that have the potential to transform our alliance.

The first “2+2” joint statement, announced on February 19, 2005, presented the common strategic worldview that Japan and the United States are attempting to forge. The document announced such ambitious bilateral goals as supporting “the peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula . . . [encouraging] China to improve transparency in its military affairs . . . and [encouraging] the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait.”⁶ Since these common strategic objectives were announced, the two sides have been engaged in intensive negotiations on a second agreement to implement these objectives.

During these negotiations, a fundamental cleavage emerged over the purpose of the talks: was the aim to find creative ways to strengthen the capabilities of the U.S.-Japanese alliance, or simply to reduce its burdens? While U.S. negotiators saw the talks as an opportunity to plan for the combined capabilities required to meet the ambitious goals of the February “2+2” statement, Japanese officials were principally concerned with political pressure to ease the costs of hosting U.S. troops, particularly in Okinawa.⁷

Reflecting Japan’s political priorities, media reportage throughout the negotiations focused almost exclusively on the reallocation of U.S. Forces in Japan, with especially detailed reports on the various proposals, counter-proposals, and arguments that arose over the future of Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma, which had been a major irritant since the 1995 rape of a schoolgirl by troops stationed there.

U.S. and Japanese negotiators worked through a long set of issues and finally reached an agreement that merges Washington's strategic vision and Japan's political requirements. Formally announced at the October 29, 2005, "2+2" meeting in Washington, D.C., this agreement reiterates the "global and regional joint objectives" detailed in the February "2+2" statement as the starting point for future cooperation. To accomplish these goals, the agreement calls for a consolidation of U.S. and Japanese facilities in Japan and lays the groundwork for Japan to shift its forces southwest towards Kyushu and the Ryukyu island chain in anticipation of a greater role for Japan in the alliance. Three specific elements of the agreement stand out.

First, the agreement provides for the establishment of two collocated headquarters, both requiring and facilitating greater jointness among the notoriously Balkanized Japanese Self Defense Forces. A bilateral and joint operations coordination center at Yokota Air Base will allow the allies to share missile defense responsibilities and sensor data, as well as coordinate joint operations.⁸ Likewise, the U.S. Army command structure at Camp Zama will be upgraded to a "deployable, joint task-force capable operational headquarters element,"⁹ while the GSDF will establish a Central Readiness Force Command. The GSDF especially stands to benefit from a collocated headquarters with its U.S. counterparts, as it is going through a very difficult transition under current Japanese defense plans. Long organized to defend Hokkaido against a Soviet invasion, the GSDF needs to learn from the U.S. Army what equipment and practices are necessary to conduct joint operations, especially under expeditionary and amphibious scenarios.

Second, the agreement marks a major step forward for U.S.-Japanese cooperation on missile defense, a field where working together will lead to greater strategic coordination. The governments have agreed to establish a U.S. X-band radar system, which will permit the high degree of information-sharing necessary for targeting ballistic missiles.¹⁰ Likewise, the United States has agreed to deploy the Patriot Advanced Capability 3 and Standard Missile to support its treaty obligations to Japan.¹¹ This progress on a cooperative missile defense capability will greatly enhance the alliance's contribution to the defense of the United States and open doors to additional collaboration.

Third, the agreement will work toward resolving the issue of U.S. Forces in Japan. The most important terms of the agreement in this regard provide that the

United States will remove some 7,000 marines from Okinawa; explore measures to restore civilian aircraft access to the airspace over Yokota and most of Tokyo, which is currently under U.S. control; and, at the forefront of the public's mind, relocate MCAS Futenma to facilities at Camp Schwab in northern, more rural Okinawa.¹²

In sum, the groundbreaking agreements between the U.S. and Japanese governments in 2005 provide a strategic vision and clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the alliance. The key challenges now will be for both governments to maintain the political will to implement these agreements, especially as they involve challenging organizational prerogatives, funding new investments in defense capabilities, and overcoming the legal barriers to a more effective alliance.

Overcoming Organizational, Fiscal, and Legal Barriers

The alliance's way forward over the coming years will require overcoming major obstacles, especially in Japan, where the transformation of the alliance provokes great political unease. Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Richard Lawless summarized the challenge at a recent AEI conference: "Words on paper can be useful because they state a commitment, but realization and commitment required national leadership, a national consensus, and the allocation of sufficient financial resources."¹³ American officials will have to work with their Japanese counterparts to produce all of these rare commodities in support of the alliance.

The first set of obstacles will involve parochial responses by Japanese military branches to change. Although the Japanese government is currently setting up a Joint Staff Office (JSO) under a 2005 revision of Japan's Self Defense Forces Law, it is not yet clear what exact role and influence it will have within the Japanese military system. This uncertainty should not surprise Americans who are still working out the proper arrangements among the Joint Chiefs of Staff, combatant commanders, and the civilian leadership after more than fifty years of experience.¹⁴

The situation in Japan is even further confused because the JSO is a sui generis organization. Unlike in the United States, the chief of Joint Staff will only have statutory authority to advise the director-general of the Japan Defense Agency on matters of operations, not policy.¹⁵ The chief of Joint Staff's operational authority

will be further compromised because joint headquarters will only be created on an ad hoc basis, with local commanders in peacetime answering to their service superiors rather than a standing joint officer, as in the U.S. combatant commander system.¹⁶ It is for this reason that the collocation of U.S. and Japanese capabilities at Yokota Air Base and Camp Zama will be especially valuable, as they will allow Japanese counterparts to gain working experience with joint operations that the Japanese structure cannot immediately provide.

The primary fiscal barrier to Japan's realization of the goals and roles set out in the 2005 "2+2" agreements is that defense spending in the country has long been treated as what Kent Calder describes as the "the residual" of the Japanese governmental budget.¹⁷ Japan has a long history of setting its defense expenditures at 1 percent of gross domestic product, a practice that has allowed the budget to grow with the Japanese economy, but has conversely resulted in the stagnation of defense budgets since the economy stalled in the mid-1990s.

Although Japan set out an ambitious defense procurement agenda in its December 2004 *Mid-Term Defense Program for Fiscal Years 2005–2009*, the pursuit of joint cooperation on such state-of-the-art projects as missile defense will push the fiscal envelope and risk the possibility of unpredictable cost increases. Already, the anticipated price tag for Japanese participation in missile defense has tripled, raising concerns about how the Japanese government will cut corners in order to maintain the 1 percent restriction.¹⁸ While the United States cannot dictate Japan's defense budget, it should carefully watch for the kind of shell games that can create undue fiscal constraints and limit participation in joint programs in the future.

It is also essential that Japan overcome its myriad legal restrictions to participation in international security cooperation. While these restrictions are too numerous to list in detail, two of the most onerous are the prohibition on the exercise of collective self-defense and the restraints on the export of weapons and arms technology.

The question of collective self-defense strikes at the heart of the U.S.-Japanese alliance. The Cabinet Legislation Bureau, which is responsible for interpreting Japan's constitution, maintains that although Japan possesses the sovereign right of collective self-defense, the exercise of that right is unconstitutional because it would exceed the minimum requirements for the defense of the nation. This interpretation is reinforced by the U.S.-Japanese Mutual Security Treaty, Article V of which compels the United

States to defend Japan without any reciprocal provision for the defense of American territory.

For the duration of the Cold War, this asymmetry in alliance obligations was moot because all realistic scenarios pointed to an American defense of Japan and counterattack against the Soviet Union from the island, hence the common metaphor of Japan as the "shield" for the U.S. military "spear" in Asia. As the two countries field an increasingly capable missile defense capability in the face of growing military challenges from North Korea and China, however, the possibility that Japan exercises collective self-defense on behalf of the United States will become increasingly real.

A second onerous legality is the ban on the export of military arms or technology imposed by Prime Minister Takeo Miki in 1976. Although inspired by pacifistic intentions, the result has been that Japan's defense industry is trapped in short product runs and is incapable of joint ventures with allied countries. Consequently, Japan produces the world's most expensive tank and mainline fighter aircraft, further eroding Japan's limited budget. Although the Japanese government has made exceptions—such as with bilateral missile defense development—Miki's export ban must ultimately be rolled back if Japan is to be a full partner of the United States.

Although neither of these changes would, strictly speaking, require constitutional revision, it is clear that the most natural way to approach them would be by rewriting Article 9 to reflect the realities of Japan's defense requirements. Although such a revision will take time, it is heartening that a recent poll by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* found that 65 percent of Japanese would support it, the highest number in postwar history.¹⁹ In any case, a national debate over the constitution will facilitate a more honest, democratically rooted understanding of the role that Japan should play in the international security system.

Liberalizing, Normalizing, Rearming

With the support—and sometimes prodding—of Washington, Tokyo is undergoing the counterintuitive process of liberalizing to attain a more assertive security posture. Japan must and is opening up, overcoming its insularity to join with the United States in transforming the alliance to become more mutually beneficial.

While Koizumi and Japan are embracing a liberal nationalism that should be familiar to America and its chief allies, the leader's annual visits to the Yasukuni

Shrine in Tokyo—where the souls of Japan’s imperial war dead, including those of Class A war criminals, are enshrined—undermine this cause. Koizumi’s visits have provoked outrage among Japan’s Asian neighbors, especially China and South Korea. Although Tokyo’s relations with Beijing and Seoul have soured over disagreements on a variety of issues, the Yasukuni question is always at the center of their disputes and sets the scene for violent anti-Japanese protests.

Koizumi has used these diplomatic contretemps to his own political advantage. Veteran journalist Yoichi Funabashi has pointed out that although foreign policy was not a significant issue in the September 2005 election, “the China factor set the context for the election.”²⁰ While the Japanese public is not especially supportive of his shrine visits, Koizumi is tapping public opposition to what many see as China’s manipulation of the history issue to cow Japan into diplomatic submission.

While the United States has not taken special offense to Koizumi’s annual visits, the matter strikes at the heart of Japan’s political liberalization—if Japan cannot honestly address its history, it will always be a hobbled alliance partner. The Yushukan museum at the Yasukuni Shrine is the perfect example of this problem. Although Americans broadly understand the need to respect Japan’s war dead, the museum’s misrepresentation of Japan’s wartime history—denying large-scale atrocities at Nanjing, for example—does anything but.

If Tokyo does not straddle the divide between national pride and regional leadership skillfully, it could further isolate itself and enmesh Washington in this isolation. Japan’s leaders need to clearly state their intention to respect their war dead, as any other nation would do, while denouncing such clear distortions of history as those in the Yushukan museum. A bold move like this would strengthen U.S. support for Japan on the question of shrine visits while sending the message to the world that Tokyo is properly grappling with its imperial past as it takes its rightful place on the world stage.

Conclusion

Speaking at a recent AEI conference in Tokyo, Shinzo Abe, Japan’s chief cabinet secretary and Koizumi’s most likely successor as prime minister, called for Japan to pursue a more assertive foreign policy. Until recently, he said, the Japanese people believed that so long as they approached their neighbors with a friendly attitude, nobody would harm them. Having learned from its bitter

experiences with terrorism and North Korea that such is not the case, Japan must now “improve the alliance, make it clear that we do have and can exercise the right to collective self-defense,” and in doing so, contribute to stability in Asia and the world.²¹ Abe’s vision of a Japan that is both liberal and nationalist, with an open political economy and an active foreign policy, is one that Americans should hope the Japanese public will embrace.

While many have portrayed Japan’s new defense policies as signs of militarism, they are in truth the rumblings of a true alliance with America that requires profound mutual trust and openness. Liberal nationalistic countries do not shy away from using force, but do so for liberal ends. The world’s democracies have nothing to fear from a Japan with a real military that it is prepared to use to fight terror, deter North Korean missiles, and counterbalance China’s military power; on the contrary, they should cheer U.S.-Japanese efforts to help Japan take its rightful place in the security order.

Notes

1. “Diet Must Focus on Terrorism: Now Is the Time to Determine Role in International Effort,” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 21, 2005.

2. “We Must Rethink What Japan Can Do to Help Afghanistan,” *Asahi Shimbun*, October 10, 2005.

3. Tetsushi Kajimoto, “Koizumi Snubs Calls for GSDF Pullout,” *Japan Times*, November 11, 2005.

4. Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan’s Re-emergence as a ‘Normal’ Military Power* (London: Routledge, 2005), 130. Indeed, Japanese troops have a strict three-step process they must follow before engaging potential insurgents, including verbal warnings, warning shots, and finally directed fire. It goes without saying that this process is ineffective in dealing with a ruthless enemy that relies upon subterfuge and surprise.

5. Interview with senior Japan Defense Agency official whose name is withheld by mutual agreement, September 19, 2005.

6. U.S. Department of State, “Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee,” February 19, 2005, available at www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/42490.htm (accessed February 23, 2005).

7. Yoichi Kato and Takeshi Sato, “Japan, U.S. Differ on Basic Approach to USFJ Realignment,” *Asahi Shimbun*, August 23, 2005.

8. U.S. Department of Defense, “U.S. Japan Alliance: Transformation and Realignment for the Future,” October 29, 2005,

available at www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2005/d20051029document.pdf (accessed November 1, 2005).

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Richard Lawless (remarks, AEI conference, Tokyo, Japan, October, 25–26, 2005), transcript available at www.aei.org/event1157.

14. At the time of the Persian Gulf War, combatant commanders were referred as commanders in chief (CINCs), a term that has fallen out of use under the George W. Bush administration.

15. Hideaki Kaneda (remarks, AEI conference, Tokyo, Japan, October, 25–26, 2005), transcript available at www.aei.org/event1157.

16. Ibid.

17. Kent Calder, *Crisis and Compensation: Public Policy and Political Stability in Japan* (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1988), 411.

18. “Cost of Joint U.S.-Japan Interceptor System Triples,” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 25, 2005.

19. Tomohiko Taniguchi, *Whither Japan? New Constitution and Defense Buildup* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2005), 5.

20. Yoichi Funabashi, “The Japan Election: Koizumi’s Victory and U.S.-Japan Relations” (presentation, Brookings Institution Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies roundtable luncheon, Washington, D.C., September 22, 2005), available at www.brookings.edu/fp/cnaps/events/funabashi20050922.pdf (accessed October 7, 2005).

21. Shinzo Abe (remarks, AEI conference, Tokyo, Japan, October, 25–26, 2005), transcript available at www.aei.org/event1157.