

Back to the Basics for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

By Paul Giarra

When Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda visited Washington, he found a very different United States, one torn by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, relatively distracted from pressing strategic Asian concerns, and far less interested in the U.S.-Japan security relationship than it should be.

Expectations for the visit were quite low. The “special relationship” between President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi is a fading memory; Prime Minister Abe’s highly touted tenure was a disappointment; to the consternation of American supporters of the Alliance, Japan has withdrawn from its Indian Ocean naval refueling mission in support of operations in Afghanistan; and the Bush administration’s Dream Team of Japan specialists is gone from the American government.

But the prime minister has done a better job than most in clarifying the terms of discussion for his visit. In a recent Washington Post interview published beforehand, he laid out the basis for security discussions that could not have been more direct, or more at odds with the Bush administration’s expectations for a more muscular Japanese military contribution to shared interests. In response to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’s request in Tokyo that Japan should shoulder global responsibilities “commensurate with its wealth and military strength”, the prime minister replied in his interview preparatory to his visit that Japan would narrow the main focus of its security policy to East Asia.

Whatever one thinks of the prime minister’s response to Secretary Gates, it serves to highlight Tokyo’s and Washington’s very different perspectives on international security. One hopes that alliance managers and policy makers in the White House and the Pentagon are following the press.

Prime Minister Fukuda’s message is, however, the basis for very constructive discussions and significant progress, if its implications are understood as a basis for future cooperation. It is no revelation that Japan and the United States see the world from very different perspectives, but their partnership has far more interests in common than it has disagreements over strategy and resources.

It helps to keep in mind that Prime Minister Fukuda had been Japan’s de facto National Security Advisor for many years, and is a great supporter of the alliance and its security relationship.

So how to proceed from here? Robert Dujarric makes the point in the Asahi Shimbun that the prime minister should concentrate on building relationships in Washington, with the Congress and elsewhere, that will prepare for dealing with the next President’s administration. This is a welcome commentary, and always a useful approach, but it does not deal with fundamental alliance circumstances. We’ve gotten ahead of ourselves in emphasizing the externalities of the alliance, manifested in the strategic emphasis on greater international roles and responsibilities for Japan to “do more”, without attending to the internal structure of the alliance, which always

has rested on a formula of U.S. bases in Japan provided in return for American strategic security guarantees, the “nuclear umbrella”.

Nothing has been said or done to change this fundamental formula. No arrangement can last forever, but it has been an article of faith in both capitals for many years that this is one that works superbly at the strategic level. That said, if the prime minister and the president want to preserve its benefits for posterity, at a time when the strategic environment is changing rapidly around them and new bilateral political, military, and economic challenges are emerging, they first will have to consider together how to satisfy the alliance’s internal requirements.

The Nuclear Umbrella

America’s nuclear security guarantee to Japan – the “nuclear umbrella” – is the bedrock of the bilateral alliance, and fundamental to regional stability and to U.S. counterproliferation strategies.

Tokyo-based Australian commentator Robyn Lim has been tireless in her argument that the strategic circumstances surrounding the bilateral security relationship have changed, and that deterrence assumptions and arrangements which are the bedrock for bilateral cooperation are outdated, and perhaps obsolete. This is an important point for American strategic planners: deterrence only works if it is accepted in the minds of its beholders. Not only must deterrent strategies and capabilities change to conform to new circumstances. They must satisfy beneficiaries, in this case Japan, as well as compel opponents. American rhetorical assurances of strategic commitment to Japan are necessary, but by themselves woefully insufficient to reassure an increasingly insecure and anxious Japanese body politic and public. Neither are closed door arrangements and developments sufficient. Security guarantees and deterrence capabilities have to be sufficiently public to have the necessary desired psychological effect. This is one of two essential internal elements of the bilateral security relationship that needs considerable attention, not least because Japan can no longer track and be assured by external strategic capabilities and modalities that were the result of U.S. arrangements with NATO during the Cold War.

After 1945, even though there never occurred U.S.-Japanese strategic or technical discussions on deterrence, Tokyo could track U.S. strategic nuclear force doctrines and operations with NATO, and thereby rest assured of the credibility of American guarantees. Currently, however, unease in Japan has overtaken confidence in the nuclear umbrella. This is an unprecedented and troubling development.

Cold War arrangements and deterrence equations upon which Tokyo depended for solace no longer pertain to the nuclear umbrella. In the meantime, the U.S. has been relatively silent on nuclear deterrence, the Nuclear Posture Review notwithstanding.

Furthermore, neither, military, bureaucratic, nor diplomatic practices, procedures, or institutional structures exist for discussion of nuclear matters. To the contrary, they have been avoided assiduously in the alliance due to nuclear politics (the “nuclear allergy”) in Japan.

Japan’s preference for American extended deterrence to the exclusion of its own independent capabilities has precluded Japanese serious re-militarization and escalation since the end of

World War 2, but cannot be taken for granted. Japan is increasingly insecure due to North Korean truculence and the emergence of China as a great power. Reactions to North Korea's nuclear capability are a stalking horse for Tokyo's concerns regarding China's nuclear arsenal. Even prior to North Korea's nuclear test, voices within the Japanese defense and foreign policy communities had begun to re-emphasize the importance of the U.S. nuclear security guarantee to Japan, while questioning its reliability.

More recently, Japanese critics and strategic commentary have questioned the reliability of the nuclear umbrella given changed strategic circumstances, and posited the requirement for Japan's own deterrent, including nuclear weapons themselves and organic Japanese preemptive strategic strike capabilities. At Japan's request, the October 2005 Joint Statement by the U.S. and Japanese Secretaries of State and Defense explicitly highlighted the importance of nuclear deterrence for Japan's Security, but American responses have been rhetorical and declaratory rather than detailed and reassuring.

Within both the Japan Defense Ministry and the Foreign Ministry, there also are clear indications of growing interest in a more formal and institutionalized U.S.-Japan dialogue on Japan's nuclear security; Japanese Foreign Ministry and Defense Ministry officials have raised questions to American interlocutors regarding the credibility of the U.S. nuclear guarantee and about how to demonstrate that credibility.

A desire to strengthen that nuclear security guarantee – as part of the overall Japan-U.S. security relationship – has partly driven heightened Japanese-U.S. defense cooperation, coordination of roles and missions, and its investment in missile defenses. For instance, informal discussions with Japanese officials by U.S. experts have elicited an interest in finding such a means to ensure and demonstrate the credibility of the U.S. nuclear security guarantee.

One idea that has arisen is a joint dialogue on nuclear scenarios that might entail U.S. deterrence of nuclear threats to Japan. Particular concern focused on possible “marginal” scenarios in which U.S. readiness to bring its nuclear deterrent to bear on Japan's behalf could be in question – or thought by an adversary to be in question. Closely related, some Japanese also have highlighted the issue of U.S.-Japan decision-making in a nuclear or missile crisis.

These are appropriate but speculative approaches, given the absence of appropriate terms and structures for a bilateral dialogue on the nuclear umbrella. Furthermore, U.S. policy makers have been virtually silent on the issue since the publication of the Nuclear Posture Review in 2001, which unnecessarily and seriously undercuts that pronouncement.

For the United States, the stakes are very high – as long as the U.S. commitment to Japan's security (including nuclear security) remains strong and credible, it is very probable that Japan will continue to choose not to seek nuclear weapons. By contrast, an erosion of that credibility almost certainly would lead to a reversal of Japan's long-standing non-nuclear posture, triggering wider proliferation chains, nuclear competition and instabilities throughout Asia, and a virtual collapse of a half-century of U.S. global efforts to contain proliferation.

These compelling circumstances require proactive American steps to articulate and communicate its strategic intentions in a deliberate process that is reassuring both politically and militarily, coupled with realistic Japanese diplomatic, military, and public engagement.

Bases

The other internal element of bilateral security cooperation that the prime minister and the president should discuss is the issue of American bases in Japan. These concentrations of U.S. military capability in east Asia are the basis for American defense strategy in the Asia-Pacific. Despite their importance, however, much more needs to be done to ensure their longevity and usefulness. As a general proposition, the United States should consider that it will have to integrate those American bases in Japan that it wishes to preserve in the long term.

In the bilateral context, over many years U.S. bases in Japan have become an “American problem”. Socially and culturally, they are too often exclusive and segregated U.S. enclaves, surrounded by large municipal populations that are pressing naturally and inexorably upon base perimeters. Despite the imperative for engaging Japan on the base issue at the local and national level, American military leaders have been very reluctant to tinker with existing arrangements, not least because the modalities for sharing arrangements have not been put into place that would guarantee access for greatly increased crisis surge forces flowing forward from the United States. There are precedents for this concern, such as at the naval base in Sasebo, where sharing pier space with Japanese civilian shipbuilding companies under ostensibly restricted peacetime agreements became problematic when the U.S. Navy wanted to “borrow back” the loaned facility.

There are, however, numerous examples of successful base sharing arrangements in Japan that point toward a successful base integration policy. These precedents start at home, where many American bases are, in fact, shared military and civilian facilities. For example, anyone who has ever flown into Honolulu International airport in Hawaii also has landed at Hickam Air Force Base. Civil-military cooperation there is smooth, the arrangements are virtually invisible, and the re-introduction of U.S. Air Force C-17 strategic airlifters to Hickam Air Force base after many years of no operational presence there other than the Air National Guard has gone off without a hitch.

Japan has its own successful precedents for base integration. Atsugi Air Base and Yokosuka Naval Base are obvious examples where Japanese Self-Defense forces and U.S. forces have operated from the same facilities. Misawa Air Base in northern Japan is an even better example. Not only do Japanese (Air Self-Defense Force) and American forces operate together, but the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air force fly from the same airfield, no mean feat in itself. To top it all, Japanese civilian airlines operate from Misawa Air Base as well.

These are longstanding arrangements. To change current arrangements remains a challenge, however. Negotiations over American (largely Marine Corps) re-deployments from Okinawa to Guam have taken many years, and still are not finalized. Furthermore, replacing the Marine Corps facility at Futenma Air Base with another airfield on Okinawa has dragged on since 1995, and lingers unresolved.

These may seem like technical issues, but base issues such as these impose severe opportunity costs. Base negotiations have sucked the oxygen from other essential bilateral discussions, and effectively have precluded vital discussions of strategic purpose and direction for the alliance. This is one reason why we are confronted with fundamental bilateral disagreement over Japan's strategic military posture and contributions to bilateral, regional, and global security, and why the alliance has not come to grips with challenges and changes to its tenets of deterrence.

One way ahead is to look for new approaches to opportunities for success already currently on the table. Yokota Air Base presents one such opportunity. It represents every aspect of the neuralgia affecting American bases in Japan. It is virtually an exclusive American enclave, despite the movement there of new Japanese Air Self-Defense Force command facilities. Yokota is the headquarters of the Commander of U.S. forces in Japan, who also commands the Fifth Air Force, but there are very few American operating forces located at Yokota – it is essentially a logistics and transportation facility of vital strategic importance for surge operations in response to regional crisis and the defense of Japan. Yokota Air Base sits in western Tokyo, amidst a burgeoning metropolitan population. It is a prime example of the opportunities for base integration, not only because the Tokyo Metropolitan Government desperately needs another civilian airport.

These circumstances provide a superb opportunity for the prime minister and the president to drive the alliance in the right direction, by getting base issues moving so that they can concentrate on other pressing bilateral concerns. Presently, however, despite the agreement between President Bush and successive Japanese prime ministers to sponsor progress toward civil-military integration, bilateral negotiations to make Yokota Air Base available to civilian passenger and cargo operations are constrained by three factors.

First, the terms of the negotiations have been artificially constrained. Limiting the negotiations to consideration and rejection of the proposal based on operational considerations that ostensibly precludes integration has prevented recognition of the broader opportunities for success that currently are on the table only implicitly. Some suggested additions include:

Bilateral civil aviation Open Skies negotiations are stalled. They should be introduced to Yokota base integration talks as a desired outcome, and built into technical arrangements as a major *quid pro quo*.

Tokyo Metropolitan Government interests must be taken into account. Whether or not he is seated at the table, the governor has a vote. His implicit veto of bilateral cooperation and good municipal relations should be converted into positive support of the American military presence as a means for constructive change. Tokyo needs another civil airfield. Careful integration of Yokota Air Base can and should be construed as a practical solution to a key Japanese civil aviation requirement.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government's current concept of adjunct civil aviation facilities on the periphery of Yokota Air Base is insufficiently integrative. Plans for civil aviation and transportation infrastructure at Yokota Air Base should penetrate the fence line and become

substantial elements of base operations. Without doing so, integration loses much of its substantive effect.

The U.S. military's own interests are not being sufficiently represented, either. Instead of simply protecting current equities, an expanded and self-interested American approach should consider the advantages of new base facilities and surrounding complementary metropolitan infrastructure, paid for and maintained by Japan but designed to American specifications and available for exclusive military use during periods of heavy operational use and surge operations. The objective would be to integrate new dual use passenger and cargo handling capacity into the base infrastructure, and build new transportation infrastructure that makes Yokota's logistics support mission feasible over the long term.

The Japanese Self-Defense Forces and the new Ministry of Defense have been bystanders in this process. They should be handed a stake in the positive outcome of civil-military integration negotiations, and offered long-denied operational access to Yokota Air Base.

Second, as a result of this constrained negotiating scope, key stakeholders have been sidelined. Negotiating authority has been vested in the same military commands and agencies that perceive that they have the most to lose, and who at best are the least motivated for change. Physically present but not engaged are Japanese and American diplomats, who have been sidelined despite their fundamental stake in alliance progress during a crucial period of strategic introspection. Not present are municipal leaders from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and civil and governmental transportation leaders from both countries, those stakeholders who have the most to gain. This is the time to revamp the structure of the debate, broaden participation, and reassign overall responsibility and authority to the foreign Ministry and Department of State.

Third, legitimate concerns that sharing with civilian entities might become permanent encroachment upon strategic military requirements could be addressed and solved, but negotiators, diplomats, and military officials have not been able to get to this key structural point regarding base integration. No suggestion for the integration of Yokota Air Base or any other military facility would be realistic or credible without guaranteed exclusive military use of the facility when peacetime and crisis operations warrant. There are a myriad of positive and successful precedents for such arrangements. To be credible, they must be based on legitimate military requirements for peacetime as well as surge operations, which are well understood by the Japanese side. Realistic arrangements must not only account for military requirements, but should anticipate and plan for the interruption of civil aviation operations when necessary. (Establishing this latter doctrine would, in itself, be a major accomplishment with beneficial effects much broader than operations at Yokota Air Base.) These arrangements must be carefully defined and exercised frequently enough to become custom tailored to legitimate bilateral interests, and to be a reminder of civil and military equities in peacetime and crisis.

Yokota Air Base civil-military integration is an important opportunity for positive change in the U.S.-Japan security relationship. If handled properly, both sides will come out stronger, and the alliance will benefit at a time when internal focus on the basics of deterrence and bases is the first order of business for the prime minister and the president.