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The Evolution of the U.S.–Japan Alliance and Future Prospects

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In order to understand the Bush Administration's relationship with Japan, we must first consider the evolving nature of the U.S.–Japan alliance, and consider three sources of the evolution in particular—leadership, domestic issues, and international issues.

Leadership and Domestic Factors

The first source is at the level of leadership. It is very clear that the particular characteristics and personalities of both President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi have been critical in shaping a new and dynamic bilateral relationship. With the U.S. presidential election complete, we can be assured that this important personal relationship will continue.

The second source to consider is factors at the domestic level. The bilateral U.S.–Japan relationship in the 1980s and 1990s was dominated by economic issues—first by trade frictions as an outgrowth of Japan's economic growth, and later frictions about Japan's economic decline.

The first Bush administration clearly was determined to shift the focus away from the economic issues, perhaps out of a sense of resignation.

Japan has also shifted its focus away from a solely economic identity to a security identity, perhaps a function of its perpetual economic inertia. Nevertheless, the shift is palpable and discernible.

The International Level

The third source to consider is factors at the international level. Both Japan and the United States

Talking Points

- There are essentially three sources to consider regarding the evolution of the Bush Administration's relationship with Japan—leadership, domestic issues, and international issues.
- As we embark on the next four years of the Bush Administration, the United States and Japan will face one of the most critical foreign policy challenges of this decade together—the North Korean nuclear issue.
- If resolved successfully, the implications may be far greater than achieving peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. It may just provide the model for a new U.S.–Japan alliance that will be a pillar for stability not just in Northeast Asia, but globally.

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struggled in the 1990s to come to terms with the end of the Cold War and its impact on their bilateral relationship. There was real skepticism on both sides of the Pacific about the future viability of the U.S.–Japan alliance.

In Japan, there was sense of waning interest. The Japanese people saw increasing costs with decreasing benefits from the alliance. Additionally, civil/military relations with the United States became increasingly tense.

There were also concerns of “Japan-passing” and “China Rising.” There was growing trepidation—rooted in former President Richard Nixon’s détente with China—that the United States was now looking past Japan to China. These concerns were only solidified by the Clinton Administration during the 1990s, when it badgered Japan on numerous economic issues, while at the same time seemed to embrace China.

The release of the Armitage–Nye report in late 2000 was one indication that a decade of inertia in the security realm was finally coming to an end.

The Impact of 9/11

September 11, 2001 changed all that. It is notable that prior to 9/11, terrorism as a security issue had been a second-tier, or even third-tier issue. In Asia, terrorist threats ranked well behind first-tier, potentially “hot” issues, such as Taiwan or Korea—and even behind second-tier territorial disputes such as the Kurils and Senkakus. Terrorism ranked more with third-tier issues such as trans-border migration, piracy, and demographic concerns.

It is in this, the third area of the international context, that I would now like to turn in order to explain Japan’s emerging security role in Asia.

Today, in the post–Cold War (and now post-9/11) world, new and different threats challenge the region, in addition to the old threats. It is not clear whether the U.S.–Japan alliance can deal effectively with the new threats of terrorism—nor the perpetual threat of North Korea. It is also not clear that Article 9 of Japan’s Constitution is as useful as it once was in providing stability in the region.

The very factors that allowed for Japan’s prosperity and stability during the Cold War ironically spawned domestic institutions—political and social—that left it ill-prepared to deal with the post–Cold War environment, much less the post-9/11 environment.

Japan never really had to squarely address many unresolved issues—history, militarization, or “normalcy”—because of its reliance on the United States for its security. Thus, domestic political institutions and the society itself were unprepared to conceptualize Japan’s national role in a changed international environment.

The Gulf War

The 1991 Gulf War was a wake-up call for Japan. In a way this was a “dress rehearsal” for Japan’s current security role. Despite how painful an experience that was for Japan, it was arguably necessary for how Japan responded to the current Iraq war, and to international crises in general.

By establishing new guidelines for alliance, the 1991 Gulf War was also the impetus for Japan’s attempt to rectify the perception that it was not pulling its weight in the alliance. Notably, new guideline considerations included plans for handling a crisis on the Korean peninsula.

Yet, these guidelines were not sufficient to address very real threats from within the region—namely North Korea.

The Challenge of North Korea

North Korea’s Taepodong launch in August 1998, as well as the North Korean spy boat incidents, further brought to light the limitations of Article 9 and the U.S.–Japan alliance.

The missile launch raised difficult questions about Japan’s right to self-defense versus collective defense, and also about the right to pre-emption. North Korean spy-boat incursions brought up issues of “rules of engagement” and whether Japanese self-defense forces would be able to fire first.

These intricate debates and the anxiety about confronting the Peace Constitution reveal how ill-prepared both Japan and the United States were to address a crisis in North Korea.

Reason for Hope

The good news is that in the last few months and years, concerted efforts in both Tokyo and Washington have produced real progress toward concrete strategies for addressing both traditional and non-traditional threats.

The United States, as part of its Global Defense Posture Review, has begun the difficult task of working with partners to encourage new thinking about the purpose and value of alliances. In Asia, Washington has encouraged allies to contribute more to their own defense by identifying key areas in which the interests of both partners are better served by assigning leadership to the alliance partner.

Moreover, the United States is asking that alliance partners reduce structural factors that impede full cooperation—for example, land and basing access for military maneuvers, and constitutional limitations.

As simple as this principle sounds, it is a new idea to the Japanese, one that will require bold changes in attitude and practice. Yet all indications are that the Japanese leadership have embraced this new initiative and are rising to the challenge.

This is evident in the Arakai Report. Although not an official report, it provides an important gauge of sentiments in Tokyo.

As we embark on the next four years of the Bush Administration, the United States and Japan will face one of the most critical foreign policy challenges of this decade together—the North Korean nuclear issue.

How the two partners can resolve this issue in a way that promotes the interests of both countries will be the true test of how far the U.S.–Japan alliance has evolved over the last half-century.

If resolved successfully, the implications may be far greater than achieving peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. It may just provide the model for a new and great alliance that will be a pillar for stability not just in Northeast Asia, but globally.

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