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U.S.–Japan Security Agreement Enhances Allied Goals

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The U.S.–Japan Security Consultative Committee (SCC)—consisting of the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense and Japanese Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense—agreed on several initiatives to upgrade the bilateral alliance. However, much work needs to be done on both sides of the Pacific in order for the agreement to reach fruition.

Defense Cuts Undermine Deal. The achievements of the SCC are impressive, consisting of new U.S. deployments to Japan, progress on long-standing bilateral objectives, and Japanese pledges to assume a larger role for its own defense and address regional and global security challenges. Japan agreed to pay $3.1 billion toward the $8.6 billion cost of redeploying U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam.

The U.S. announced it would deploy to Japan P-8 maritime patrol aircraft and F-35B combat aircraft (their first deployment outside the U.S.), Global Hawk unmanned aircraft on rotation, and a second TPY-2 X-band radar to enhance defense of Japan and the U.S. homeland against North Korean missiles.

The positive effects of the U.S. deployments must, however, be balanced against the broader deleterious impact of massive cuts to the U.S. defense budget. President Obama imposed $482 billion in cuts to the Pentagon even before the additional sequestration-mandated cuts.

These cuts are already undermining U.S. capabilities in the Pacific theater. For example, due to the budget cuts, one-third of U.S. Air Force planes worldwide are grounded, and several Pacific-based ships remain in port. Moreover, U.S. Marines face a critical shortage in transport ships even as the revised Guam Agreement moves Marines further east and earlier than originally planned.

Will Tokyo Pull Its Own Weight? The new SCC agreements—while extremely welcome—represent written hopes of future success and do not, in and of themselves, represent achieving those objectives. They are a means and not an end. For example, the statement pledged to "officially begin the review process of the guidelines for Japan–U.S. defense cooperation."

The problem in the U.S.–Japan alliance has never been a shortage of documents but, rather, success in implementing existing promises. U.S. defense officials bemoan that the same agreements are repeatedly affirmed and accolades given for re-achieving the same accomplishments.

U.S. public statements of Japan as the cornerstone of U.S. security in the Pacific mask private frustration with the lack of progress in getting Japan to actually fulfill its promises. As a former senior U.S. defense official facetiously (but accurately) said privately in 2005, "If we accomplish half of this agenda in five years, we'll be where we should have been 10 years ago."

Parsing the text of the SCC statement, one can see characteristic Japanese expectations for the U.S. to fully carry out its pledges but only Japanese intent

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to try to implement their side of the bargain. Of note were nuanced differences over the long-planned (17 years and counting) movement of a U.S. Marine Corps air unit from Futenma to a replacement facility on Okinawa. Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida announced that the U.S. agreed that "there should not be indefinite use of the Futenma Air Station" while Japan agreed to work toward constructing the replacement "with a strong will."

The U.S. has made countless unilateral concessions in order to improve the potential for Okinawan approval, while Tokyo has dragged its feet through successive administrations. The SCC statement affirmed last year's revised Guam Agreement—in which Washington made additional concessions—and contained new concessionary announcements, including that over half of training for the newly deployed MV-22 Osprey would be conducted out of Okinawa.

Japan's Defense Buildup. The SCC statement also incorporates several defense initiatives of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Since resuming office last December, Abe has brought a welcome new vitality to Japanese security issues, spurred by growing national concern of the rising Chinese and North Korean threats. Remarkably, within only weeks of entering office, Abe implemented two supplemental adjustments to last year's defense budget and increased this year's by 2.9 percent, reversing the trend of 11 consecutive years of reduced Japanese defense spending.

Abe has also called for a revision to Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines and pledged to adopt a collective self-defense strategy, create Japan's first national security strategy, and create a National Security Council to overcome the country's weak crisis decision making. All of these initiatives have been debated for decades within Japan, but many expect that Abe may actually move Japan forward on all these issues.

The U.S. would welcome progress, particularly on collective self-defense, which would allow Japan to defend U.S. forces that are defending Japan and enable Tokyo to be a more effective security contributor to international peacekeeping operations.

Counterproductive Statements. Abe has also brought increased concern over perceived "resurgent Japanese militarism." Over the years, Abe and other Japanese politicians have made revisionist historical statements minimizing Japanese actions in World War II that have inflamed regional reactions. These statements are historically and ethically wrong, controversial, and needlessly counterproductive, since they undermine Japanese and U.S. security objectives.

That said, Abe's planned security initiatives do not pose a risk to the region. Instead, they represent Tokyo assuming a security role commensurate with the responsibilities of a major nation. Inaccurate—or deliberately misrepresented—perceptions of a Japanese "threat" divert attention from the real challenges to regional peace and stability: those coming from China and North Korea.

The Abe administration needs to do a far better job of explaining its intended security role and capabilities and the continued inherent constraints on the exercise of that military power to Japan's neighbors. The forthcoming revised National Defense Program Guidelines, expected by year's end, should be used as a means for providing that explanation.

What Washington Should Do. As the allies move forward to implement the agreement, Washington should urge Japan to:

- Increase its defense budget to beyond 1 percent of Japan's gross domestic product, adopt collective self-defense, and implement long-overdue changes to its overly restrictive rules of engagement. Doing so would enhance allied capabilities and enhance Japanese contributions to international peacekeeping operations.

- Downplay efforts to revise the constitution and adopt a pre-emptive strike capability, focusing instead on less controversial and more attainable objectives such as collective self-defense, which would provide immediate benefits to the alliance.

- Take all necessary steps to implement the Futenma Replacement Facility in a timely manner. Continued Japanese inaction calls into question its commitment to the alliance.

- Increase efforts to educate the Japanese legislature and public on the necessity of expanding the Japanese security role and presence of U.S. military forces in Japan.

- Strive to improve relations with South Korea. Efforts to respond to current security threats are

hindered by the perception that Japan has failed to suitably address and atone for past actions. Tokyo should take the historical issue off the table by dealing with it.

A Bigger Security Role for Japan. Today's SCC statement will hopefully reassure South Korea that Japan remains integrally linked with the U.S. as it strives to expand its security role. The Abe administration has demonstrated that it seeks to further integrate Japanese forces with those of the U.S. rather than pursuing nationalism-driven militarist goals, as some have alleged.

Although South Korean–Japanese relations will remain tense, both countries, along with the U.S., should try to overcome or at least minimize the impact of past differences on forward-looking defense policies.

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