

# The End of the Silver Lining: A Chinese View of the U.S.-Japanese Alliance

Enhanced security ties between Washington and Tokyo since the mid-1990s, particularly during the past few years, have transformed the U.S.-Japanese alliance and reshaped the East Asian security environment. Although external threats to Japan today are at a historic low, the transformation has created room for Tokyo to pursue a more active and aggressive security policy. From dispatching troops to Iraq to listing Taiwan as one of the “common strategic objectives” between the United States and Japan in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan has shown increased assertiveness and willingness to work militarily with the United States. Impressed by Japan’s enthusiasm and dynamism in promoting security cooperation, U.S. deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage, an enthusiastic proponent of strong U.S.-Japanese security ties, remarked satisfactorily on the achievements in the U.S.-Japanese alliance at the end of the first Bush administration: “[I]f you look back to where we were in 2000 and where we are now, oh, so many things have changed. So many things.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, as the United States and Japan have expanded their security ties to reflect changes in their respective threat perceptions and regional security strategies, strong concern has arisen in other countries.

This is particularly true in Beijing, which believes that enhanced security cooperation between Washington and Tokyo compromises China’s security interests. For years, many Chinese analysts regarded the U.S.-Japanese alliance as a useful constraint on Japan’s remilitarization. Developments since the mid-1990s and especially during the past few years, however, have convinced them that the alliance has become an excuse for Japan to pursue a more active security policy. Moreover, the “China factor” has played an

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even stronger role in U.S.-Japanese security cooperation under the Bush administration than in previous years. Concern with checking rising Chinese power and deterring a possible Chinese use of force in the Taiwan Strait has caused Washington to push for more assertive Japanese security policy, shaping both the form and substance of U.S.-Japanese security cooperation. Indeed, as Beijing continues to expand its material power and influence in Asia, Washington has sought to balance China's rise through its campaign to return Japan to a "normal nation." Contrary to past policies, the United States is now driving rather than constraining Japan's rearmament. In the foreseeable future, short of a major adjustment of U.S. regional security strategy, the U.S.-Japanese alliance will act as a propellant of, rather than as a cap on, Japan's military development. At least as far as China is concerned, the bright side of the U.S.-Japanese alliance seems to be gone.

### **From Protégé to Partner: Redefining the U.S.-Japanese Alliance since the 1990s**

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The U.S.-Japanese alliance has come a long way, even since the mid-1990s when the Clinton administration redefined Washington's security ties with Tokyo. Revisions of the U.S.-Japanese defense guidelines in 1996 and 1997 transformed the former Cold War security arrangement from an instrument to protect Japan against external threat into one designed to cope with contingencies on the Korean peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait, as well as for balancing against a rising China. Japan's role in the alliance expanded significantly as Tokyo moved from protégé to partner. Efforts to strengthen the alliance also reduced the possibility that Japan would pursue a security policy independent of the United States. Nonetheless, the Clinton administration exercised some caution by not overtly advocating that Japan revise its constitution and remove the ban placed by Article 9 on its rights of collective defense, which stands at the core of the "Peace Constitution" imposed by the United States after World War II. The scope of U.S.-Japanese security cooperation was focused on the Asia-Pacific region, defining the alliance's parameters as regional rather than global. Finally, although the Clinton administration worked hard to strengthen security ties with Japan, it also made efforts, particularly in its second term, to engage China to develop a "constructive strategic partnership." Such efforts helped reduce Chinese suspicion of the U.S.-Japanese alliance and, to some extent, redressed the imbalance in relations among the three major players in the region.

The Bush administration is a vociferous proponent of U.S. security ties with Japan and has consequently brought the U.S.-Japanese alliance to a stage unimaginable in prior years. Its blueprint for upgrading the U.S.-Japa-

nese alliance can be found in the so-called Armitage Report, which argued that the revised guidelines for U.S.-Japanese defense cooperation “should be regarded as the floor—not the ceiling—for an expanded Japanese role in the transpacific alliance.” It also called for revising the Japanese constitution and legitimizing the right of collective defense, suggesting that “Japan’s prohibition against collective self-defense is a constraint on alliance cooperation.”<sup>2</sup> Marking a major break from past U.S. policy, the report set the U.S.-British relationship as the model for U.S.-Japanese ties. Aspiring to turn Japan into the United Kingdom of the Far East, the report suggested a wide range of elements aimed at strengthening U.S.-Japanese defense cooperation and transforming the alliance.<sup>3</sup>

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With many of the participants of the Armitage Report, such as Michael Green, James Kelly, Torkel Patterson, Paul Wolfowitz, and Richard Armitage himself, joining the Bush administration, the United States worked assiduously to strengthen and upgrade its security ties with Japan following the blueprint outlined in the report. In June 2001, U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs James Kelly stated in congressional testimony that, “over the next few years, we hope to build with Japan an enhanced strategic dialogue encompassing both economic and security issues, a dialogue built on the foundation of the wide range of beliefs and perspectives we share with Japan, and which taps the full potential of our alliance relationship.”<sup>4</sup> The U.S. *National Security Strategy* released in September 2002 reiterated the Bush administration’s position that it will “look to Japan to continue forging a leading role in regional and global affairs.”<sup>5</sup>

Since the September 11 attacks, Washington has been endeavoring to globalize the alliance, urging Tokyo to assist the United States in the war in Afghanistan and in the reconstruction of Iraq. Military cooperation has been substantially deepened between U.S. and Japanese forces, particularly with Japan deciding to join the United States in deploying a theater missile defense system, the operation of which will require the integration of U.S. and Japanese command, control, and communication systems. Furthermore, under the U.S. plan to realign its global military bases, Japan will serve as a key stronghold in the Asia-Pacific region, hosting the headquarters of U.S. ground, air, and naval forces in the region. Moreover, the Bush administration has openly urged Japan to revise its Peace Constitution and remove the ban on its rights of collective defense, suggesting explicitly that such a change would be a prerequisite to Japan obtaining a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of the Bush administration's efforts and the activism demonstrated by Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, the U.S.-Japanese alliance has been remarkably upgraded and bilateral security cooperation greatly strengthened during the first Bush administration. As Vice President Dick Cheney noted in early 2004, "Today, our alliance is far more than a bilateral security pact. It is a global partnership dedicated to promoting our common vision, solving problems, and meeting challenges wherever they may arise."<sup>7</sup> Armitage did not want to hide his satisfaction while commenting on the progress in U.S.-Japanese security cooperation. He said, "I think that we have accomplished the goals of the Armitage Report. ... I'm very excited about what's been accomplished over four years."<sup>8</sup> Some U.S. observers note that Washington's attitude toward Japan has shifted from "Japan bashing" and "Japan passing" to "Japan surpassing," suggesting that Tokyo's actions on security cooperation with the United States have gone beyond Washington's expectations.<sup>9</sup>

## **Chinese Concerns over an Upgraded U.S.-Japanese Alliance**

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Such heightened security cooperation and a strengthened U.S.-Japanese alliance, however, has raised a number of concerns in Beijing, particularly about their implications for Japanese politics, its China policy, Tokyo's military development, and regional stability as a whole, particularly in the Taiwan Strait.

### **A MORE CONSERVATIVE JAPAN WITH A TOUGHER CHINA POLICY**

The unprecedented attention that the Bush administration has paid to the U.S.-Japanese alliance coincided with and underpinned a conservative trend in Japanese politics which, in recent years, led to Tokyo's adoption of a tougher China policy, a deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations, and in the spring of 2005 widespread anti-Japanese protests in China. Although many individual issues, such as entanglements about the history of Japanese aggression in World War II, competing claims to the Diaoyu islands, oil and gas rights in the East China Sea, and Japan's growing involvement in the Taiwan issue, have contributed to increased tensions in bilateral relations, the crux of the problem lies in Japan's evolving domestic politics and its strategic thinking about China. Japan's domestic politics have become increasingly conservative, a trend that has culminated in the Koizumi administration. Hailed as "neo-conservatism" in Japan, this political current has two important manifestations. The first is an effort to whitewash Japan's history of aggression during World War II. The second is an attempt to turn Ja-

pan into a “normal country,” jettisoning the post–World War II limitations imposed on its security policy.

Under these circumstances, the history issue has become a major source of contention between China and Japan. Japanese conservatives complain that China keeps pushing Japan to apologize for its aggressive past. Yet, although Japan has never apologized in a meaningful way for the atrocities committed in China during the 1930s and 1940s, in reality the Chinese care less about who delivers an apology or what exactly is said and more about Japan’s handling of issues related to that unfortunate part of history. They are angered and concerned by the relentless attempts by right-wingers in Japan to smooth over the country’s past atrocities, particularly in its history textbooks; the lack of responsible measures on the part of the Japanese government to reimburse Chinese “comfort women” and forced laborers who suffered badly at the hands of Japanese militarists; and inadequate action by Japan to address the issue of chemical weapons abandoned by its military in China at the end of World War II.

Koizumi has also been paying tribute to the Yasukuni Shrine, where Class A Japanese war criminals from World War II are enshrined, every year since he came to power in 2001. Such actions, controversial even among Japanese, humiliate and infuriate the Chinese. Indeed, Koizumi’s uncompromising attitude is what has brought Japan’s political relations with China to a deadlock. Japan’s actions on all these issues, affected partly by its unique cultural tradition and partly by its rising political conservatism, only fuel the Chinese belief that Japan is fundamentally incapable of behaving as a responsible power and achieving genuine reconciliation with its neighbors.

As the U.S.-Japanese alliance has strengthened, Japan has embraced the idea that a rising China is a strategic rival. In December 2004, Japan’s new National Defense Program Guidelines named China as a possible threat to its national security for the first time.<sup>10</sup> Beyond discussions of the North Korean threat, the guidelines turned to China, expressing strong concern over China’s modernization of nuclear and missile capabilities as well as its naval and air forces and the expansion of its area of operation at sea. The new guidelines, which set out Japan’s defense policies for the next decade, suggested that Japan should be attentive to China’s future course. Prior to this, Japan’s Ground Self-Defense Force developed a defense plan to prepare for a possible Chinese attack.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in February 2005 the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee released a joint statement laying out a set

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of common strategic goals for the alliance. Noteworthy was its inclusion of China-related issues, including Taiwan. Although the wording was subtle, the fact that Japan and the United States officially recognized confronting these issues as one of their common strategic goals suggests that China will increasingly drive security cooperation between Tokyo and Washington and underscores Japan's increased focus on China as a priority concern on its national security agenda.

### **JAPAN BECOMING A MAJOR MILITARY PLAYER**

From Tokyo's and Washington's perspectives, Japan's return to normalcy means greater military might and a more active and assertive security policy. Beijing, however, is very concerned with the orientation of Japan's security policy, viewing it as one of the key factors affecting stability in Northeast Asia as well as China's security environment.<sup>12</sup> Given Japan's well-equipped Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and particularly its advanced naval and air forces, Japan is already a major military power in Asia. Moreover, its military strength continues to grow as Tokyo seeks to develop its power projection, intelligence collection, and ballistic missile capabilities. The Chinese also wonder whether Japan will continue to lower the threshold for its overseas military activities. In the late 1990s, the revised U.S.-Japanese defense guidelines and the Laws Regarding Contingencies in the Surrounding Areas of Japan made it possible for Japanese troops to be involved in a conflict outside of Japanese territory.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, Koizumi promulgated the "Special Law for Dealing with Terrorism," which, although confining the role of the SDF to noncombat zones and to providing logistical support, lowered the threshold for dispatching Japanese forces overseas.<sup>13</sup> As the United States launched the Iraq war, Koizumi's government moved to draft a law on reconstruction and humanitarian assistance for Iraq, under which Tokyo dispatched three SDF services. This was the first time since World War II that Japan has sent its troops overseas for reconstruction and humanitarian aid purposes not mandated by the UN. These steps have greatly undermined the spirit of Japan's current constitution as embodied by Article 9, which forbids the deployment of Japanese forces abroad. Furthermore, the Koizumi government, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and other Japanese conservative forces, encouraged by what they have accomplished in the past decade and spurred on by the Bush administration, are now aiming to revise the Peace Constitution and amend Article 9 in particular, thus removing Japan's last obstacle to freely exercising its military muscle.<sup>14</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, Japan has come a long way to becoming a major military player. It maintains one of the most modernized armies in the

world and continues to expand its military capability. Since 1992, it has enacted 21 major pieces of security-related legislation—nine in 2004 alone—legitimizing and legalizing sending military forces abroad. Japan is drifting away from pacifism, driven partly by its evolving domestic politics and partly by the United States. As one U.S. expert on Japan noted, “Since the end of the Cold War in 1991 and particularly under the administration of George W. Bush, the United States has been doing everything in its power to encourage and even accelerate Japanese rearmament. Such a development promotes hostility between China and Japan, the two superpowers of East Asia.”<sup>15</sup> This has given rise to strong Chinese concern over U.S. strategic intentions toward China, as well as the mission of the U.S.-Japanese alliance in today’s security environment.

**E**volving regional trends and challenges call for the creation of a security community.

### **THE TAIWAN STRAIT**

Of Beijing’s various concerns about the U.S.-Japanese alliance, the most acute is the potential impact on China’s handling of the Taiwan issue. Unfortunately, the strengthened U.S.-Japanese alliance has led to Japan’s accelerated involvement in the Taiwan issue, as demonstrated by the February 2005 U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee joint statement, which in turn has further harmed Sino-Japanese relations. The widespread anti-Japanese protests in China in the spring of 2005 were aroused not only by historical and territorial disputes but also by Japan’s unwarranted interference in what China perceives as its core national interests in the Taiwan issue.

To Washington and Tokyo, the alliance will serve first and foremost as a formidable deterrent against Beijing’s possible use of force against Taiwan. Should deterrence fail, their alliance would serve as a platform for a joint U.S.-Japanese response to a contingency in the Taiwan Strait. In 1996 and 1997, when the United States and Japan worked to revise their defense cooperation guidelines, they included the Taiwan Strait in the parameters. Even though Tokyo insisted that the parameters are situational rather than geographical, the Taiwan Strait and the Korean peninsula have been listed by Tokyo and Washington as the two potential hot spots necessitating U.S.-Japanese security cooperation in East Asia. Since the defense cooperation guidelines were revised, both U.S.-Taiwanese and Japanese-Taiwanese security ties have been remarkably enhanced. Given the long-held U.S. security commitment to Taiwan, the expansion of U.S.-Taiwanese military relations may be expected. The growth of Japanese-Taiwanese security ties, however, should be attributed to the expanded mission of the U.S.-Japanese alliance.



In fact, interaction between Washington and Tokyo on the Taiwan issue has been increasing, with Tokyo more actively consulting and coordinating with Washington in its relations with Taipei. After listing Taiwan as a common strategic objective in February 2005, Japan and the United States are reported to be working on a joint war plan for the Taiwan Strait.<sup>16</sup> As the U.S.-Japanese alliance assumes the function of security guarantor to Taiwan, it serves to embolden the separatist forces in Taiwan, who believe that, no matter which side provoked a war in the Taiwan Strait, Washington and Tokyo would be ready to come to their rescue. Based on this calculus, Taiwan has been pushing for the creation of a “U.S.-Japan-Taiwan security coalition” in recent years.<sup>17</sup> For Beijing, the hard reality is that, if the situation in Taiwan spins out of control and requires force, it has to be prepared to deal not only with the United States but also with a militarily more active and capable Japan.

### **POLARIZING THE REGIONAL SECURITY STRUCTURE**

Chinese analysts believe that it has been a key U.S. policy objective to maintain primacy in regional security since the Cold War years. To that end, Washington not only retains a strong forward deployment but also a vibrant “hub-and-spoke” alliance system, of which the U.S.-Japanese alliance is the core. In the post-Cold War era, Japan has become an even more valuable piece of the U.S. regional security strategy: it helps consolidate U.S. preponderance and balance China’s growing power. As Japan becomes more actively involved in the U.S. regional security strategy, enhanced U.S.-Japanese security ties will contribute to the primary U.S. strategic position in East Asia and the western Pacific region, amplifying U.S. clout on regional political, economic, and security affairs. As the alliance also intends to serve as the backbone of a regional security structure, the emphasis placed on it reflects an attempt to enhance the U.S.-Japanese condominium of regional security, a development that will both undermine China’s influence in the region and run the risk of returning the region to a bipolar structure characterized by strategic competition, antagonism, and even confrontation. A bipolar regional order would be a nightmare scenario, at least for China and presumably for the entire region, including the United States and Japan.

From a Chinese perspective, the evolving political, security, and economic trends in East Asia call for the creation of a new security arrangement—a security community that will meet the region’s needs, ranging from fighting terrorism to curbing the spread of weapons of mass destruction to protecting the sea lanes of communication. Because today’s security challenges differ greatly from those of the Cold War era, the approaches must as well. Such a security community should be pluralistic and based on several



pillars, including a concert of major powers (the United States, China, Japan, and Russia); ad hoc coalitions on specific issues, such as the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue; existing security alliances, such as the U.S.-Japanese alliance; and regional or subregional mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).<sup>18</sup> Creating this type of security community in the Asia-Pacific region is possible because states in the region have shared interests in peace and stability. It is also feasible because countries are increasingly aware of the necessity to work together to confront today's security challenges, and habits of security cooperation are being developed region-wide. Hopefully, the budding mechanisms for regional security, such as ARF and even the six-party talks, will evolve into more effective instruments to promote regional cooperation.

**Efforts to strengthen military cooperation with Russia are a reflection of Chinese concerns.**

It is worth noting that far-sighted U.S. strategists have also realized the necessity of security community-building in the region. Dennis C. Blair, former commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, observed in 2001 that, although the United States has long approached security relations in Asia as a hub-and-spoke arrangement, "the question now is how the United States will develop and implement security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific region to handle the challenges of the twenty-first century." In his opinion, it is preferable to promote "security communities" in which states cooperate in areas of shared interest such as peaceful development, diplomacy promotion, and the use of negotiation to resolve disagreements.<sup>19</sup> To some extent, the Bush administration's overemphasis on the U.S.-Japanese alliance has gotten away from this approach.

## **Tough Choices Ahead**

It is unrealistic, given its concerns, to assume that China will openly embrace the U.S.-Japanese security alliance as a durable institution for regional security. Yet, this is not to say that China cannot tolerate or learn to live with it. To a large extent, Beijing's perception and attitude depends largely on the alliance's mandate concerning China, as well as the state of trilateral relations among Beijing, Tokyo, and Washington.

Although the U.S. political elite generally agree on the desirability of expanding U.S.-Japanese security ties, two different schools of thought exist in the United States regarding the function of the alliance vis-à-vis China. One suggests that the alliance should play an instrumental role in develop-

ing a security arrangement among the United States, Japan, and China. As former deputy assistant secretary of defense Kurt Campbell noted, “It is hard to imagine a continuing future of peace and stability in Asia unless these three powers can negotiate a kind of strategic *modus operandi*.”<sup>20</sup> Some in this camp argue that the broader goal of the alliance “is to integrate China

**If trilateral relations are largely stable, Beijing will be less suspicious.**

and Russia into a regional security order without sacrificing the security of Japan, South Korea, and the United States.”<sup>21</sup> No matter what the ultimate formula of the security calculus looks like, this line of thinking seeks to use the alliance to engage and integrate China. The other school emphasizes constraining and containing China. Believing that a rising China is doomed to be the United States’ “strategic competitor” and the Taiwan Strait to be the

place where the United States could become enmeshed in a major war in Asia, adherents of this school argue that a strengthened U.S.-Japanese alliance, including an expanded Japanese role, will best serve the purpose of containing a stronger China and deterring China on the Taiwan issue.<sup>22</sup>

If the alliance opts for engagement and integration, Beijing will likely be willing to live with it and even work with it on certain issues of common interest. For example, the United States and Japan can seek to work with China to promote peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and ensure the safety of the sea lines of communication in the western Pacific region. Even on the Taiwan issue, the U.S.-Japanese alliance can play a constructive role. In the fall of 2003, for example, when Taiwanese leader Chen Shui-bian pushed for a plebiscite on cross-strait relations in the election campaign and sharply raised tensions in the Taiwan Strait, both Washington and Tokyo urged Chen not to push too far. In the end, the pressure from Beijing, Washington, and Tokyo helped keep Chen at bay.

If the alliance chooses constraint, deterrence, and even containment, however, China will naturally view it as a major security threat and will endeavor to counterbalance it. Efforts to promote a more active Japanese military posture in order to balance a rising China and to accelerate U.S.-Japanese involvement in the Taiwan issue are all indicative of this approach. Current Chinese efforts to strengthen military cooperation with Russia, including the first joint military exercise between the two countries, held in August 2005, are a reflection of its growing concern over the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

The state of U.S.-Chinese-Japanese trilateral relations also informs Beijing’s perceptions of and attitude toward the alliance. If China has normal relations with the United States as well as Japan and trilateral relations

are largely stable, Beijing will be less suspicious of a Washington-Tokyo axis, as it will believe that both the United States and Japan value the importance of the trilateral framework to manage regional affairs and to promote their respective national interests. Under these conditions, the U.S.-Japanese alliance and the trilateral framework are more likely to be complementary than competitive. Yet, if trilateral relations are not stable and assume a posture of two (the United States and Japan) against one (China), Beijing will feel that the alliance mainly serves as a platform through which Washington and Tokyo will work against China rather than alongside it. Currently, despite various problems, Sino-U.S. relations are largely stable, while Sino-Japanese relations are at a historic low. Trilateral relations are consequently neither balanced nor sound, only increasing Beijing's suspicion of the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

Japan's desire to become a "normal" country, to walk out of the shadow of being an aggressor and a loser in World War II, is understandable. Japan's normalcy, however, does not necessarily require building a more powerful military machine, assuming a more assertive military posture, or taking a rising China as its arch enemy. That Washington attaches great importance to the U.S.-Japanese alliance as its key security investment in the region since the Cold War years is also understandable. Yet, strong U.S.-Japanese security ties should not come at the expense of stable U.S.-Chinese-Japanese trilateral relations. Indeed, as China's material power and influence grows, it will play an even more important role in regional affairs. In the end, sound trilateral relations among Beijing, Tokyo, and Washington will best serve regional peace and prosperity.

## Notes

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