

The U.S.-Japan Alliance

John Allen and Benjamin Sugg

Introduction

On the 6th of January 2016, the North Korean government announced that it had tested a hydrogen bomb 30 miles east of Kilju city.¹ Just two months later Kim Jong-un declared the regime's successful development of nuclear warheads small enough to fit on ballistic missiles.² Earlier this year the Chinese government stepped up its incursions around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, it has continued the construction and militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea, and has recently announced its intentions to send nuclear armed submarines into the Pacific Ocean for the first time.³ These developments clearly illustrate the high level of tension that increasingly defines Japan's security environment and affirm the essential nature of the U.S.-Japan alliance and its indispensable role in maintaining stability in Northeast Asia.

The Alliance

Established in the aftermath of the Second World War, the U.S.-Japan alliance has proven to be a remarkably resilient security partnership and the cornerstone of stability for the region. First conceived as the Mutual Security Pact (1952), the alliance was later updated to the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security (1960), whereby Japan agreed to provide U.S. forces with basing rights on its territory in exchange for the provision of security against external threats. Currently, the U.S. bases over 50,000 troops in Japan (over half of whom are located in Okinawa) and enjoys access to 89 facilities.⁴ This considerable forward deployed force in the Western Pacific, which includes one nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, allows military readiness in countering potential regional threats and maritime aggression, specifically the nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities of the opaque dictatorship in North Korea.

While for the majority of its existence the alliance has been non-mutual, meaning that Japan has not been legally obligated to provide defense to the U.S. if it were attacked, new guidelines to the treaty established between the Abe and Obama administrations will now allow Japan to come to the defense of other countries, albeit within certain legal limitations, including the requirement of approval (or certainty of approval) by the Japanese Diet.⁵ The Japanese government has also

¹ "North Korea nuclear: State claims first hydrogen bomb test," BBC, January 6, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35240012>.

² "North Korea 'has miniature nuclear warhead', says Kim Jong-un," BBC, March 9, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35760797>.

³ Julian Borger, "China to send nuclear-armed submarines into Pacific amid tensions with US," *The Guardian*, May 26, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/26/china-send-nuclear-armed-submarines-into-pacific-us>.

⁴ Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ian E. Rinehart, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance," Congressional Research Service, February 9, 2016, Summary.

⁵ Jim Garamone, "U.S., Japanese Officials Announce New Defense Guidelines," DoD News, U.S. Department of Defense, April 27, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/604526/us->

conducted various overseas operations that directly contributed to U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. These included a long-term naval refueling mission in the Indian Ocean supporting U.S. operations in Afghanistan and deploying some 600 troops to Iraq, where Japanese forces played an important role in Iraqi reconstruction operations after the U.S. invasion.⁶

The “operational density,” or the extent to which the U.S. and Japanese defense establishments are integrated and participate in exercises together, has steadily grown stronger over the course of the alliance. Both states have increased bilateral coordination and communication, and have sought interoperability in areas such as ballistic missile defense (BMD), cyber security, and the use of space. The Bilateral Joint Operations Command Center at Yokota Air Base is a clear example of the extent of such integration where both parties share information to improve target identification, tracking, and interceptor cueing.⁷ Additionally, the U.S. and Japan have participated in a variety of multilateral exercises with other friendly nations in the region, including Australia and the Philippines.

Complementing the security alliance, the U.S. and Japan have grown increasingly closer economically. Japan is currently the United States’ fourth largest trading partner, and in 2014 the U.S. conducted more than \$200 billion in trade with Japan.⁸ Both countries have also served key roles in the negotiations involving the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), a sweeping Pacific free-trade agreement involving 12 nations, which is expected to be voted on by both houses of the U.S. Congress later this year. While elements of bipartisan opposition to the deal certainly pose challenges for ratification, if enacted, the TPP is projected to give Japan an additional 2.7 percent boost in economic growth by 2030, with a more modest boost for the U.S. at 0.4 percent.⁹ Additionally, for the past 28 years the U.S. and Japan have collaborated within the science and technology sectors under the auspices of the U.S.-Japan Science and Technology Agreement (1988) which has been particularly beneficial to both sides.

Domestic Tensions

Although the alliance has endured throughout the post-Cold War era and into the 21st century, the partnership has not been without its difficulties and critics. Arguably one of the most controversial aspects of the security arrangement has been the large number of U.S. forces stationed in Okinawa. According to a recent report by the Congressional Research Service, two regularly cited sources of opposition to the military bases include “(1) concerns that the

[japanese-officials-announce-new-defense-guidelines](#): Satoru Mori, “The New Security Legislation and Japanese Public Reaction,” Tokyo Foundation website (<http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2015/security-legislation-and-public-reaction>).

⁶ Chanlett-Avery and Rinehart, “Alliance,” 29.

⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁸ United States International Trade Commission, “The Year in Trade 2014: Operation of the Trade Agreements Program, 66th Report,” publication no. 4543, July 2015, 24, https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/old_pub4543.pdf.

⁹ William Mauldin, “Pacific Trade Pact Set to Give Big Boost to Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/pacific-trade-pact-set-to-give-big-boost-to-japan-vietnam-malaysia-1452110460?cb=logged0.31944955856833657>.

American presence degrades the local quality-of-life with regard to personal safety, noise, crime, and the natural environment; and (2) pacifism and anti-militarism.”¹⁰ As part of a realignment effort between both states to address the issue, there have been plans to relocate Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma to a less populated area in the northern portion of the island by 2022 as well as plans to relocate 9,000 marines (and their dependents) to Guam (5000), Australia (2,500), and Hawaii (1,500).¹¹ While domestic tensions surrounding the basing issues are likely to continue between the conservative Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP), the liberal Democratic Party (DP), and the locals of Okinawa, the fundamental and strategic premises of the U.S.-Japan alliance remain uncontested.

Within the U.S., there have been calls to examine Japan’s overall contribution to the alliance. MIT political scientist Barry Posen has argued that Japan, who is technologically advanced and maintains a high per capita GDP, spends only 1.0 percent of its GDP on defense (compared to the U.S. who spends 4.6 percent), and should thus assume a much larger share of responsibility in maintaining its security.¹² While Posen’s comparative analysis on defense spending between allies is worth consideration, it is important to note that the Japanese government provides nearly \$2 billion a year to offset the cost of stationing U.S. forces in Japan by means of both the Special Measures Agreements (SMAs) and the Facilities Improvement Program (FIP).¹³

China

Largely due to the liberalization reforms enacted during the Deng Xiaoping administration in the late 1970s, China has experienced a rapid and generally continuous degree of economic growth, which in turn has significantly bolstered its ability to project its influence both economically and militarily. The latter is beginning to increase regional alarm. While China’s rise has produced some positive outcomes, including but not limited to the improvement of the standard of living for tens of millions of Chinese citizens and the provision of low-cost exports and labor to the global market, its increasingly aggressive maritime behavior in the East and South China Seas poses a serious challenge to regional stability, the strategic balance in the region, and the security of Japan and its neighbors.

A fundamental aspect of China’s current and future power projection capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region is its strategy of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD), and the array of weapons developed in support of this concept. Potential challenges posed by A2/AD include the barring of U.S. forces and Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) from the near-seas region and the potential to prohibit or interdict the use of the global commons by means of ballistic missiles, submarines, and offensive space and cyberspace assets.¹⁴ Inherent in China’s A2/AD strategy is

¹⁰ Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ian E. Rinehart, “The U.S. Military Presence in Okinawa and the Futenma Base Controversy,” Congressional Research Service, January 20, 2016, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1, 17.

¹² Barry R. Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-01-01/pull-back>.

¹³ Chanlett-Avery and Rinehart, “Alliance,” 21.

¹⁴ Nathan Freier, “The Emerging Anti-Access/Area-Denial Challenge,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 17, 2012, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/emerging-anti-accessarea-denial-challenge>.

its naval modernization efforts, which as identified by Naval Affairs Specialist Ronald O'Rourke, include its aircraft carrier program, anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), surface-to-air missiles, mines, manned aircraft, unmanned aircraft, submarines, destroyers, frigates, corvettes, patrol craft, amphibious ships, and mine countermeasures ships (MCMs).¹⁵ China's announcement in 2013 of a new air defense identification zone (ADIZ) that includes airspace above the Japanese controlled Senkaku Islands potentially serves as a move to advance the country's A2/AD strategy, but more importantly increases the potential for a destabilizing event to take place due to overlapping zones between the two countries.¹⁶ None of China's moves in and of themselves creates the level of provocation or threat that demands a U.S. unilateral or a combined military response, but taken together, the trend line of improved Chinese capabilities with greater assertiveness in the region is worrisome and could potentially create a military confrontation with various escalatory risks.

As described in Article 5 of the 1960 U.S.-Japan security treaty, Japan enjoys extended deterrence provided by the U.S. across all territories under its administration, including the Senkaku Islands. That being said, the U.S. holds a position of neutrality concerning the sovereignty of the islands, which has been interpreted as strategically ambiguous by some.¹⁷ Therefore in addition to countering China's A2/AD strategy, the U.S. must work to assure Japan that its extended deterrence policy is unwavering in the provision of security for Japanese citizens while simultaneously weighing its own national interests in the potential escalation over what currently amounts to a non-existential, offshore, territorial dispute between Japan and China.

North Korea

The North Korean regime presents a qualitatively different challenge to Japan's security. While certainly aggressive in multiple respects, China is deeply integrated in the world economy and in 2014 conducted over \$340 billion in trade with Japan alone.¹⁸ In contrast, North Korea is an isolated, revisionist state with no such skin in the international game. Demonstrating its disregard for the established security order in the Asia-Pacific region, the North Korean regime has ramped up its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile efforts. At present, North Korea maintains the ability to strike Japan with its Musudan (3,000km) and Nodong missiles (1,300km). Although these missiles are largely viewed as inaccurate (the Musudan has never been tested publicly), they certainly remain potential threats to the Japanese population and

¹⁵ Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, May 31, 2016, 5.

¹⁶ Ian E. Rinehart and Bart Elias, "China's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ)," Congressional Research Service, January 30, 2015.

¹⁷ Mira Rapp Hooper, "Uncharted Waters: Extended Deterrence and Maritime Disputes," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2015), 132.

¹⁸ "JETRO Survey: Analysis of Japan-China Trade in 2014 (Based on imports of both countries)," Japan External Trade Organization, February 5, 2015.

<https://www.jetro.go.jp/en/news/releases/2015/20150225183-news.html>.

U.S. forces stationed in Japan.¹⁹ Such threats have been noted, and the U.S. and Japan have fostered high levels of cooperation on BMD, including the joint development of the U.S. Navy's RIM-161 Standard Missile 3 (SM-3) ship-based missile system.²⁰ The two allies have also engaged in developing interoperability with Patriot Advanced Capability-3 surface-to-air interceptor batteries (PAC-3), and Japanese officials have shown strong interest in purchasing the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD) and the Aegis Ashore system.²¹

Following its formal withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in early 2003, North Korea accelerated its nuclear ambitions and in 2006 conducted its first nuclear weapons test. Since 2006 there have been additional tests, all of which have unsurprisingly raised tensions with its neighbors, including its sole regional partner, China. While unconfirmed by the international community and the nonproliferation regime, and widely dismissed as a hoax, North Korea's recent announcement of its successful test of a hydrogen bomb illustrates its intentions to challenge the existing order and the security of U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific region.

Geography necessitates that one of Japan's primary national interests is the maintenance of stability on the Korean peninsula. The security threat posed by the North Korean regime underscores the importance of working to improve relations between South Korea and Japan in order to ultimately establish effective trilateral coordination in Northeast Asia. The distrust between Japanese and South Korean officials, which is largely due to the countries' antagonistic relationship during the 20th century and past aggressions by Imperial Japan, is a diplomatic obstacle between two liberal, free-market democracies that face nearly identical threats to their security.²² Although the re-establishment of broad-based ties between South Korea and Japan is a complicated and difficult process, it will be a crucial factor in Japan's ability to counter future aggression by both North Korea and China.

Conclusion

Threats in Northeast Asia will most likely continue to diversify for the near future, and therefore the relevance of the U.S.-Japan alliance will only increase in maintaining regional stability. Since 1945 U.S.-Japanese relations have weathered numerous wars (some of which took place in the region), the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the proliferation of transnational terrorism. As noted above, the tensions and disagreements that exist between the two countries on issues concerning basing in Okinawa and the asymmetry in defense spending are largely tactical and do not undermine the alliance in any strategic sense. In the context of the current U.S. "rebalancing" to the Pacific, the alliance is imperative to addressing the rise of China and the provocations of North Korea.

¹⁹ "North Korea's missile programme," BBC, February 7, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17399847>.

²⁰ "Standard Missile-3," Raytheon, <http://www.raytheon.com/capabilities/products/sm-3/>.

²¹ Rachel Hoff, "U.S.-Japan Missile Defense Cooperation: Increasing Security and Cutting Costs," American Action Forum, December 2, 2015.

²² Chanlett-Avery and Rinehart, "Alliance," 10.

China's rise has produced a variety of geopolitical effects and consequences. As previously stated, its demeanor has become increasingly aggressive in its maritime operations in both the East and South China Seas. China's emerging A2/AD strategy, coupled with its long-term and well-resourced military modernization and its territorial claims on the Senkaku Islands are of immediate concern for Japan. Additionally, North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs risk destabilizing the entire region. The regime's opaque and hostile behavior acts as a constant and clear reminder of the importance for the U.S. to work on building trust and bridging relations between South Korean and Japanese governments.

At a time when one of America's closest allies is facing a variety of threats, some of which are existential, there are few things more damaging than fostering ambiguity about U.S. commitments to the maintenance of security and stability in the Asia Pacific. Fiscal and political constraints will undoubtedly influence future relations between both countries, but these inescapable forces should not hinder Washington's ability to assure Japan that its security, as well as the security of its neighbors, is deep-seated in U.S. grand strategy and the balance of power in the region.