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New Common Strategic Objectives for the US-Japan Alliance: Continuing Quiet Transformation

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Quiet Transformation of the Alliance

The US-Japan Security Consultative Committee joint statement released on June 21, 2011 in Washington, D.C. was subtitled “Toward a Deeper and Broader U.S.-Japan Alliance: Building on 50 Years of Partnership,” and lists US-Japan security objectives for future joint defense cooperation. This statement successfully paves the way for the US-Japan leaders’ summit meeting later this year.

There are two sets of pillars contained within the 24 objectives listed. First, the rise of China is explicitly addressed. The United States and Japan reaffirm their endorsement of China’s “responsible and constructive role in regional stability and prosperity” while encouraging “openness and transparency” regarding China’s ongoing military modernization. However, and without mentioning any specific country, the statement “discourage[s] the pursuit and acquisition of military capabilities that could destabilize the regional security environment.” This implies that both Japan and the United States share concerns about the intentions of the People’s Liberation Army’s development of anti-access and area denial capabilities. The issue of maritime safety and security is also addressed with the inclusion of “defending the principle of freedom of navigation.” The global commons, including space and cyberspace, is again reiterated as a shared interest, as is the point of “Promot[ing] dialogue on the diversification of supplies of critical resources and materials, including energy and rare earths,” the export of which was suspended by China last September after the Japanese Coast Guard detained an illegal Chinese fishing boat near the Senkaku Islands.

Second, it is clear that the new direction for the alliance is towards creating a regional security architecture throughout the Asia-Pacific. Notably, this new objective is emphasized through trilateral cooperation with Australia and the Republic of Korea respectively, and trilateral dialogue with India is also mentioned. Security cooperation between Japan, the United States and ASEAN is another area for potential joint cooperation. Clearly, Tokyo and Washington have shared interests in bilateral and mini-lateral security cooperation with ASEAN members, particularly Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Japanese and US “governance and capacity building” assistance to ASEAN members is an important avenue to further develop closer relationships.

In addition to these Asia-Pacific objectives, the new list of Common Strategic Objectives also has much to say on the potential for US-Japan global cooperation. Upon close examination, these objectives are an effort by Japan as an internationally responsible state to look outward, not inward. The task ahead for Japan is to overcome domestic constraints, specifically domestic legal and political sensitivities regarding

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Japanese military missions overseas. Potential NATO-Japan cooperation, mentioned in the 2007 Common Strategic Objectives, is not included in this statement. However, there remains a lot of scope regarding future Japan-NATO global security cooperation, and should be considered by both Japan and the United States as another avenue for Japanese defense collaboration with third parties.

In the next section of this US-Japan Security Consultative Committee joint statement entitled “Strengthening of Alliance Security and Defense Cooperation,” both governments reaffirm further study on joint planning for Japanese defense and regional security contingencies. In editorials, the *Nikkei* and *Yomiuri*, two major Japanese newspapers, support this position and urge both parties to implement these proposals. Obviously, Japan and the United States need to prepare during peacetime for the detailed, scenario-based security challenges within Northeast Asia, including contingencies other than on the Korean peninsula. Thus, “in order to deter and respond proactively, rapidly and seamlessly to various situations in the region” there is an emphasis upon bilateral training, exercises, shared use of facilities, and cooperation on information-sharing and “joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities.” Moreover, both sides reaffirm the establishment of a “bilateral extended deterrence dialogue on a regular basis.” This is pertinent to the continued uncertainty regarding North Korea, and in a time when the United States is attempting to move towards a world devoid of nuclear weapons.

Other Quiet Steps Amidst A Lack of Political Leadership

Implementation is key, but without strong political leadership in Japan, it is exceedingly difficult to expect an increase in defense spending or a change in the interpretation of Article Nine of the Constitution which prevents the right of collective self-defense. There is, however, much that can be done at the administrative and professional military level. This includes sharing strategic thinking and further developing a strong security and economic partnership in this era of change within the established international order. First, both governments can enhance their deterrence posture, based upon different scenarios. Second, developing a regional security architecture with the increase of trilateral and “between spokes” partnerships should be welcomed as a strategic advantage for all parties concerned, and especially for Japan and the United States.

Third, even though Japan should review its Official Development Assistance policy and budget, both countries can jointly explore different policies to secure their energy needs, while continuing to secure the common global sea lines of communication. Fourth, it is expected that Japan will be very assertive in putting itself forward as a host for a global and regional center for natural disaster responses. Thus, this joint statement affirms the importance of establishing a regional logistics hub of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. As the joint US-Japan responses to the Indian Ocean December 2004 tsunami and Operation *Tomodachi* after the Japanese March 11 earthquake and tsunami tragedies demonstrate, both governments have the resources, expertise and operational capability to effectively respond to large scale regional disasters. Finally, it is crucial that an effective mechanism be found pertaining to the “China question” in which all three countries can proactively address topics of cooperation, and areas of concern, with the end goal of building mutual trust. A US-Japan-China trilateral official dialogue is one option, but this suggestion is not yet clear, and probably not enough. First, Tokyo and Washington need to enhance their bilateral meetings, and then prepare their communication strategy for jointly engaging with China. US-Japan alliance coordination is a crucial component of this equation.

Giving this Vision Top Priority

With limited financial resources available for both the United States and Japan, it is now time to think seriously about the difficult choices within the Common Strategic Objectives and where to allocate finite resources. Clearly, it is time for fresh and new thinking, and simply relying on past Japan-US alliance performance is no longer a solution to the regional and global challenges that both countries face.