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Japan-US Alliance Adapts to the Needs of the 21st Century

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Satoru Fuse, Political Correspondent with TV-Asahi in Tokyo, explains that “The SCC agreement tasks Japan with two roles: to reinforce its capability to defend its own sovereign territory, specifically the Senkaku Islands, and to reach out and assist Southeast Asian countries in building up their own defensive capabilities.”

The Japan-US Security Consultative Committee (SCC)—also known as the “2+2”—was hosted for the first time in Tokyo on October 3 between the US secretaries of state and defense and their Japanese counterparts from the ministries of foreign affairs and defense. The subsequent Joint Communiqué outlined a vision for both parties to be “full partners in a more balanced and effective Alliance” ensuring regional and global peace and security. Coming only five days after President Barack Obama’s address to the UN General Assembly where he focused on the Middle East, and not on Asia, many Japanese were reassured by the forward looking joint statement that promoted international norms including freedom of navigation, rule of law, open markets, democracy and human rights. Even though it was only mentioned once in the document, it is clear that China’s rise, specifically its growing military presence in the region, was at the top of the SCC agenda. North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and missiles was also addressed in the joint statement, but for many Japanese increased Japan-US defense cooperation is aimed at addressing China’s military development more so than North Korea’s.

China’s strategy of developing asymmetrical capabilities including Anti-Satellite (ASAT) and Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles (ASBM) that potentially threaten the US military’s ability to operate within the Asia theater are a growing cause of concern for both Japanese and US policy makers. The establishment of a Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) working group is a direct response to this concern. The two parties also reached agreement on the joint use of military bases, thus enabling both the Japanese and US militaries greater flexibility and maneuverability as and when required. This point is strategically very important for the southern Ryukyu Island chain—the First Chain of Islands—as it is here that Chinese forces would potentially be prevented from gaining access to the Western Pacific. This also opens the option for the dispersal of high-value US military assets such as AWACS aircraft, air tankers and F-22s to Japanese Self-Defense Force military bases in eastern and northern Japan. In addition, agreement on the immediate deployment of P-8 anti-submarine ISR aircraft, the rotational deployment of Global Hawk drones beginning in 2014, a new radar installation, along with the planned deployment of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters to Okinawa in 2017, will all enhance the evolving US strategy of Air-Sea Battle (ASB).

Japan’s contribution to the SCC agreement is very much focused on the provision of Space Situational Awareness (SSA) information to the United States via the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA). This agency, under the control of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, has long been

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known for its passive culture in matters of national security. This attitude, however, has been changing over the past few years and JAXA is now focusing more on the development of defense technologies for use in space. One example is a joint project planned with the Ministry of Defense for an Early-Warning Satellite. This shift, which was impossible to imagine just twenty years ago, may be an indication of the new cross-government approach towards Japan’s national defense.

The SCC agreement tasks Japan with two roles: to reinforce its capability to defend its own sovereign territory, specifically the Senkaku Islands, and to reach out and assist Southeast Asian countries in building up their own defensive capabilities. The purpose here is for Japan to be a more proactive contributor towards the alliance with the end goal of “a more robust alliance and greater shared responsibilities” as the United States welcomes “Japan’s determination to contribute more proactively to regional and global peace and security.”

By putting the onus on Japan to bolster its own defensive capabilities pertaining to sovereign territory, it is obvious that the reference is to the defense of the Senkaku Islands, an area where China is aggressively pursuing its own claims of sovereignty. The US message to Japan appears to be that Japan, by itself, has to curtail and manage ongoing Chinese assertiveness and defend the islands without initial support from the United States.

The other task delegated to Japan concerns the wider issue of regional peace and stability in preventing smaller Southeast Asian countries from capitulating to Chinese dominance. Japanese assistance, especially maritime assistance, could do much for countries like Vietnam and the Philippines who are engaged in their own territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. Japanese assistance to these countries, and others in Southeast Asia, could potentially be a major strategic benefit for Japan. Peace and stability in the South China Sea is as important to Japan as it is to Southeast Asian states, especially as Japan’s Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) transverse through those waterways.

These are two new developments that have come out of this latest SCC, though the argument can be made that this trend has been unfolding for some time now. The issue of how allies share burdens and responsibilities is both an old question and a new challenge. The US demand that Japan has to be a more proactive partner in the alliance may be a joint tactical decision to promote Japan’s strategic role in the region or it may just be a result of the austerity cuts underway in the United States.

Japan’s primary concern regarding the alliance is the gradual decline of US involvement in Asia brought about by a mixture US defense budget cuts, sequestration and domestic political gridlock. The fact that President Obama was unable to attend the APEC forum and the East Asia Summit is another continuation of this narrative. Demands for US attention to the Middle East are yet another addition to this list. The SCC joint statement did address many of the Japanese fears regarding the military side of the US commitment to Japan and to the wider region. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said regarding Tokyo’s anxiety about the current state of US domestic politics.

Japan too has also had its own domestic economic and political difficulties over the past decade, though the recent election of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has somewhat abated the political turmoil that was enveloping the country. The problem today is firmly within the economic sphere. Some of the proposals outlined in the SCC statement will be a huge challenge for the Japanese government to fund. Therefore, it will not be until the Abe administration manages to stabilize the faltering economy that the full vision outlined for the Japan-US Alliance can be fully implemented.

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