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US-Japan Security Relations: Towards a “Deeper and Wider Alliance”?

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Last week, for the first time in four years, and for the first time since the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) assumed power in September 2009, the United States and Japan held a meeting of the Security Consultative Committee, or the so-called “2+2” talks, comprising cabinet-level foreign and defense officials in Washington, D.C. Following the consultations, a set of four documents including a Joint Statement were released. While these documents embody admirable efforts to create positive momentum in the US-Japan alliance, the alliance continues to face the risk of drift.

Yuki Tatsumi, Senior Associate of the East Asia Program at the Stimson Center, cautions that “Without seriously tackling the fundamental [political] challenges that prevent the transformation of the US-Japan alliance, an effort to ‘deepen’ and/or ‘widen’ this alliance will only end up being ‘pie in the sky.’”

Overemphasis on Futenma: It is a Symptom, Not a Cause

In the days leading up to and immediately following the meeting, media and analysts focused on the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma on Okinawa Island to a different location on the island. Less than a month prior to the meeting, three powerful US Senators who serve on the influential Armed Services Committee—Senators Carl Levin, John McCain and James Webb— issued a joint statement criticizing the current relocation plan as “unaffordable and unworkable.” Shortly following their statement, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO)—a government watchdog—issued a report essentially supporting the Senators’ claims. Finally, on June 16—a few days prior to the meeting—the Senate Armed Services Committee essentially endorsed the Senators’ claims about the difficulty of current relocation plans for Futenma by adding a number of conditions to authorize funding for the construction of new facilities that are to be built on the US island territory of Guam. The plans for Guam are directly linked to the relocation of Futenma.

Despite these developments within the United States, the 2+2 announced that after a year and a half of drift under the DPJ administration, Japan is now committed to the relocation plan that was originally agreed under the previous Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government back in May 2006. In reality, it is currently politically unfathomable to envision a timely and steady implementation of the 2006 Futenma relocation plan. Not least because of an earlier promise made by the DPJ’s first Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama to move US forces off the island altogether, which was then wholeheartedly endorsed by the people of Okinawa and still is today. However, the impasse on Futenma should not be the sole focus of bilateral relations, or the alliance. In fact, the lack of progress regarding the relocation of MCAS Futenma is just a symptom of a more fundamental problem that the US-Japan alliance faces. The problem is that the US-Japan alliance has been unable to regain positive momentum since Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi left office in 2006.

Common Strategic Objectives—Too Comprehensive?

The Common Strategic Objectives that were announced in the Joint Statement following the meeting is a telltale sign of such a lack of progress. The 24-point list is extremely comprehensive. In addition to its renewed emphasis on the objectives that are more directly linked to the “security of Japan” and “peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific



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region,” it ranges from promotion of human security, stability in the Middle East and North Africa, nuclear nonproliferation, response to new areas of threats (especially cyber and space), and everything else in between.

This long list demonstrates that the two countries indeed have a wide set of shared interests, but the list is almost too long. It looks as though both sides decided to include whatever they can agree on without deliberating what is required of each country in order to pursue these objectives.

One may argue the fact that the two governments were able to agree on “revalidated and updated” Common Strategic Objectives based on what was agreed when the LDP was in power is an accomplishment in itself. It could even be argued that these Common Strategic Objectives enable both governments to set the “floor” on which the two countries will continue to build their alliance. However, an examination of the 24-point list begs this question: did the two allies evaluate how alliance cooperation up to today has helped—or has not helped—achieve the Common Strategic Objectives agreed to in 2005 and updated in 2007.

Indeed, comparison between this Joint Statement and the Common Strategic Objectives that were agreed upon in February 2005, and updated in May 2007, makes one realize that the alliance transformation that was planned by alliance managers on both sides at that time is nowhere near complete. Nor is the realignment of US forces in Japan as evidenced by the ongoing stalemate on Futenma’s relocation.

Same Old Challenges Remain

One has to recognize that Japanese security policy has almost stalled since Prime Minister Koizumi left office. The challenges then—right of collective self-defense (imperative in deepening defense planning between the US military and Japan Self-Defense Forces), Japanese Arms Exports (critical to US and Japanese deeper technological cooperation including ballistic missile defense), and Japan’s flattening defense spending—continue to plague Japan’s security policy today, essentially preventing Japan from playing a more dynamic role in international security or the alliance. The continuing political mess in Tokyo almost guarantees that none of these challenges are likely to be addressed in the foreseeable future. However, without addressing these fundamental Japanese challenges, any dialogue to “deepen” the alliance will ring hollow—leading to the promulgation of long lists of agreed interests but without the decisions or actions to actually pursue them.

The fiscal situation in both countries further complicates any effort to revitalize the alliance. Japan’s fiscal challenge is obvious—it has to fund the recovery effort after the March 11 disaster with a sluggish economy, a social security system that is going bankrupt, and an increasingly older population. The United States, in turn, has to find ways to reduce a rising budget deficit. The recent announcement by President Barack Obama that commits the federal government to reduce “security-related” spending by US\$400 billion over the next twelve years will place the US defense budget under even tighter scrutiny. In short, both Japanese and US defense planners will be required to “do more with less.” In addition, leadership changes at the Pentagon, the 2012 US presidential election, combined with muted Japanese political leadership mean that both countries will find it almost impossible to engage in any long-term alliance agenda setting, much less implementation, in the near term.

The June 21 meeting demonstrated that the United States and Japan are both interested in ensuring that the image of a strong US-Japan alliance is preserved. The Joint Statement, particularly the new Common Strategic Objectives, illustrates the breadth of the interests shared by both countries. When looking at the political landscape surrounding the alliance however, the political leadership that is required to pursue these goals is simply not there. Without seriously tackling the fundamental challenges that prevent the transformation of the US-Japan alliance, an effort to “deepen” and/or “widen” this alliance will only end up being “pie in the sky.”

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