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Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies

The Glacier Moves:
Japan's Response to U.S. Security Policies

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Executive Summary

- The Bush administration's efforts to forge a stronger political-military partnership with Japan have enjoyed some success, thanks largely to a positive response by Prime Minister Koizumi.
- The greatest progress has been in the war on terrorism, the most notable accomplishment is of which Japan's unprecedented Indian Ocean naval deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.
- While this move signals an important shift in Japanese attitudes toward acceptance of collective defense and military force, Japan's metamorphosis into the "Britain of East Asia" is at best a distant prospect.
- Japan is in no hurry to accept the legitimacy of collective defense, preferring incremental steps in this direction camouflaged by formal adherence to its long-standing "self-defense only" position.
- As suggested by Tokyo's waffling on missile defense, moreover, Japan is divided over how best to ensure its national security and there is no consensus in favor of a closer strategic embrace with the United States.
- None of this necessarily precludes Japan's continued evolution over time into a "normal country" in political-military terms and a stronger, more self-confident American ally.
- The process of strengthening the political-military partnership between the United States and Japan is likely to remain frustratingly slow and equivocal; U.S. policymakers would be well advised to discard expectations of rapid change.
- The danger lies in overestimating Japan's current ability and willingness to "step up to the plate" on collective defense in the event of a full-blown military crisis in northeast Asia.

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The Bush administration came into office with high hopes for strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance. As was adumbrated in the October 2000 "Armitage Report" — a bipartisan road map of the future of the relationship assembled by a group of Japan experts, including several tapped for senior positions in the new administration — the goal was a closer and more equal partnership on the model of that between America and Britain. (The emphasis on Japan is also reflected in the Administration's National Security Strategy and Quadrennial Defense Review.) From Washington's perspective, there were several key markers of progress toward this partnership. One was Tokyo's participation in the joint development of a missile defense shield designed to protect both Japan and the United States. Another priority was Japan's willingness to allow its Self Defense Forces (SDF) to stand shoulder to shoulder with U.S. forces in regional military conflicts, including those geographically remote from Japan. A third was the revival of Japan's moribund economy, which was assumed to require a more determined approach to reform.

Few Americans knowledgeable about Japan had any illusions that its evolution into the "Britain of East Asia" would be easy. The most obvious impediments included the continued appeal of pacifism as manifest in a widespread aversion to military force, support for Japan's "self-defense only" posture, and acceptance of its constitutional ban on collective defense. (Article 9 of Japan's 1947 "Peace Constitution," which renounces the use of military force to settle international disputes, is interpreted to permit self-defense but prohibit collective defense.) Although the collective defense taboo had not blocked U.S.-Japan military cooperation related to Japan's defense, it loomed as a major obstacle to the broader collaboration envisioned by the Bush administration. The Armitage Report had consequently urged Japan to revise its constitution to eliminate this obstacle. From Washington's standpoint, however, the central issue was less constitutional than political and psychological — namely, Japan's willingness to share the military burdens of upholding international peace and security. Tokyo had, in the American view, signally failed to rise to this challenge in the 1991 Gulf War and 1994 North Korean nuclear crisis when the SDF, in effect, sat on its hands. The question now was whether or not Japanese attitudes had "matured" to the point where, if similar crises arose, the SDF would be deployed in the common defense.

SIGNS OF CHANGE

There were, to be sure, encouraging signs that Japan was moving in the desired direction. Beginning in 1992, Tokyo relaxed its collective defense ban to allow SDF participation in UN peacekeeping operations, albeit under highly restrictive conditions. (SDF personnel were forbidden, for example, to use weapons except in individual self-defense, transport munitions, submit to UN operational command, or participate in operations in which a cease-fire was not in effect.) In 1997, Japan revised its defense cooperation guidelines with the United States to enable the SDF to provide logistical support to U.S. forces in the event of military contingencies "near" Japan. In 1998, Tokyo agreed to participate in joint research with the United States on a theater missile defense system intended to protect Japan and U.S. bases located in Japan. Another milestone was reached in 1999 when the SDF "fired its first shot in anger" — with broad public approval in Japan — in an encounter with a North Korean "spy boat." And in 2000, the Diet established bodies to look into constitutional revision with a view to eventually legitimizing Japan's participation in collective defense activities.

Underlying these developments was a gradual shift in Japanese thinking about their national security. During the cold war, a consensus had formed around the idea that Japan's security should be sought through economics and "peace diplomacy." (The economics-first

emphasis of this approach was formalized around 1980 in the doctrine of "comprehensive security.") Sheltered beneath the American nuclear umbrella with no perceived serious external military threat until the Soviet naval buildup in the Pacific in the 1980s, most Japanese assumed they could safely abstain from international power politics and devote their energies to the pursuit of material prosperity and economic superpower status. With the waning of the Cold War, this consensus began to erode and those who advocated shouldering "normal" international political and military responsibilities acquired increasing influence over Japanese policymaking. Contributing to this development were the decline of the Left, generational change, and rising nationalism. Perhaps more important, however, were heightened Japanese sensitivity to international criticism of Japan's "bystander" posture on military security matters; their alarm over Chinese and North Korean bellicosity and unpredictability; and their concern over the long-term reliability of the U.S. security guarantee if the SDF continued to be held back from supporting American forces in military crises. Also playing into this development was Japan's fear of abandonment by the United States, which was stimulated by talk of drawing down U.S. forces in the region and signs that Washington might prefer China as a partner.

OBSTACLES TO CHANGE

Given these attitudinal changes, one might expect that Japan's political-military "normalization" would have proceeded apace. But in fact, this process has been gradual, hesitant, and contested. Pacifism, while on the defensive, is far from a spent force. Japanese pacifists, moreover, can count on foreign, particularly Chinese and Korean, support for their dubious contention that moves toward assuming greater international military responsibilities feed (and are fed by) the revival of militarism and ultra-nationalism. Other influential groups with different foreign policy agendas also oppose movement toward defense normalcy and closer strategic cooperation with the United States. "Mercantilists" fret over the possible impairment of Japan's access to vital overseas markets and sources of raw materials. "Multilateralists" prefer to focus on the United Nations and regional multilateral initiatives. "Asianists" are worried about the impact of defense normalization on Japan's efforts to forge cooperative relations with China and the rest of Asia. And "Gaullists," while by no means averse to a larger and more active Japanese military role, criticize any move that smacks of subordination to the United States. Perhaps the most fundamental obstacle to change other than the continuing appeal of pacifism, however, is the complacency of the Japanese people as reflected in their attachment to a relatively comfortable status quo and their reluctance to assume the burdens of engagement in international power politics.

The reorientation of Japan's national security priorities has been complicated by its prolonged economic slump and soaring government debt, which have limited defense spending and focused attention inward on domestic reform. (By the same token, these developments have also generated pressure to cut Official Development Assistance — a mainstay of "comprehensive security" — which many critics see as an increasingly unreliable instrument to maintain the goodwill of key countries such as China. The declining efficacy of Japan's economics-first approach to national security has arguably boosted the appeal of political-military normalization.) Contrary to earlier expectations, moreover, the breakdown of the cold war-era hegemony of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the left-right axis of Japanese party politics has not given rise to bolder and more effective political leadership. Indeed, the exigencies of building and maintaining coalition governments have, if anything, reinforced pressures for compromise and consensus.

"CHANGE-WITHIN-CONTINUITY"

These constraints have imposed a distinctive pattern on the process of defense policy change. This process tends, for example, to be excruciatingly slow: controversial initiatives sometimes languish for years before a consensus can be mustered to implement them. One example is the protracted debate over cooperating with the United States in the research and development of a theater missile defense system. The process of defense policy change also tends to be reactive in that the impetus for consensus often comes from public alarm over external events such as North Korea's August 1998 firing of a missile over Japan. (U.S. pressure is also widely assumed to be an important stimulus to change, but this kind of assertion is counterproductive insofar as it raises Japanese nationalist hackles.) Perhaps more curious is the tendency to seek consensus by portraying moves toward collective defense as representing no change in Japan's self-defense only posture. This contradictory approach frequently lends an Alice-in-Wonderland quality to domestic policy debates. Argumentation is highly legalistic, prone to hairsplitting, and leads to the placing of cumbersome and — to foreign eyes — bizarre restrictions on the SDF. A case in point is the 1991-92 debate over the UN Peacekeeping Operations Cooperation Bill. Its proponents argued that the SDF could constitutionally participate in UN peacekeeping missions as long as military force was avoided. Selling this idea required months of debate in the national DIET over how to insulate the SDF from the slightest risk or "taint" of combat. The legal implications of actions such as transporting ammunition were exhaustively explored, resulting in the restrictive rules of engagement noted above. The collective defense barrier was thus breached in fact if not theory — Japanese troops were able to participate in UN missions to uphold international peace and order, but in a way that seemed to involve no departure from Japan's force-in-self-defense-only orthodoxy.

Considered from the standpoint of Japanese domestic politics, this "change-within-continuity" approach offers a relatively noncontroversial way of edging Japan toward larger international military responsibilities. One downside, however, is that it leaves the Japanese people unprepared to deal with the risks of military action, particularly the possibility of casualties. (The public consternation and hand wringing evoked by the killing of a Japanese peacekeeper by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in 1993 are symptomatic of this situation.) Another shortcoming of this approach is that it breeds uncertainty and suspicion regarding Japan's intentions. Those expecting a more forthright embrace of collective defense are usually disappointed and inclined to dismiss the half-measures offered as mere tokenism. Conversely, those demanding more rigorous adherence to Japan's self-defense only posture are equally dissatisfied, seeing these measures as steps toward "covert remilitarization." It might be supposed that it would be in Japan's interest to clarify its position by grasping the nettle of constitutional revision (or reinterpretation.) This, for example, is the view taken by the Bush administration. Japan's political elite has, however, so far shrunk from confronting this challenge, largely because it is divided over the desirability or necessity of doing so. Some are deterred by the risk of stirring up a divisive national debate. Others fear adverse Chinese and Korean reactions. Still others are sincerely committed to pacifist ideals or see these ideals as adding a moral dimension to the pursuit of economic objectives. Perhaps most important, few regard constitutional change as an urgent national priority, as is reflected in the leisurely pace of the Diet's consideration of constitutional revision — it is expected to take five to ten years.

ENTER KOIZUMI

Given the unpromising prospects for anything more than gradual and equivocal change, the Bush administration's hopes for speeding the development of a more "mature partnership" with Japan depended heavily on the emergence of a strong leader willing and able to pull it in this direction. As previously noted, however, Japan's political system is not geared to producing such leaders. Certainly Yoshiro Mori, the hapless lame duck prime minister in the spring of 2001, was not up to the task, and Washington could only hope that the vagaries of LDP factional politics might result in the selection of a more satisfactory successor. As it happened, Japan's perennially dominant party was on the electoral ropes at this time and, as is its wont in such circumstances, turned to a charismatic maverick in the person of Junichiro Koizumi with a view to enhancing its flagging appeal to Japanese voters. Koizumi's election as LDP leader and Japan's prime minister in April 2001 was greeted with enthusiasm by many American observers. They were impressed not only by his extraordinary popularity with the Japanese public, but by his talk of dispensing with politics as usual, implementing bold economic reforms, and revitalizing the American alliance. He also won plaudits for his advocacy of constitutional revision and reconsideration of the ban on collective defense, as well as for his personal rapport with President Bush, which was compared to the "Ron-Yasu" (Reagan-Nakasone) relationships of the 1980s. Indeed, to some observers, a restoration of that relatively halcyon era of bilateral security cooperation seemed to be in the offing.

Skeptics, however, cautioned against expecting too much of Koizumi. They noted, for example, that he lacked an independent power base within the LDP and was consequently forced to rely on the uncertain cooperation of his party's conservative "Old Guard." They also called attention to the fact that Koizumi seemed not to have a clear vision of where he wished to lead Japan, much less a coherent game plan for realizing it. There were, moreover, signs that he might not be fully in synch with proponents of a closer strategic partnership with the United States. Particularly disconcerting was his noncommittal response to the Bush administration's urging that he sign on to its missile defense plan. (Unlike the earlier proposal for theater defense, this plan called for the integration of theater and U.S. missile defense systems, posing for Japan the sticky constitutional issue of collective defense.) Also disquieting was Koizumi's controversial August 13, 2001 visit to Yasukuni Shine, a major focus of pre-1945 militarism and ultranationalism, which critics lambasted as a gratuitous provocation of Chinese and Korean sensitivities. Although Washington adopted a posture of studied neutrality, it could hardly have been pleased by a move that heightened domestic and foreign resistance to high-profile initiatives by Japan to expand its international military role.

THE WAR ON TERRORISM

The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon abruptly transformed Japan's domestic and international environment, providing Koizumi with an unprecedented opportunity to launch just such an initiative. In Japan, as elsewhere, the graphic horror of these attacks — repeatedly played on national television — inspired a wave of solidarity with the United States and its "war on terrorism," including international military action against al Qaeda perpetrators and their Taliban protectors in Afghanistan. After some initial hesitation and quiet prodding by Washington to "show the flag," Koizumi came forward with a seven-point military support package, the centerpiece of which was the dispatch of a Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) flotilla to the Indian

Ocean to provide logistical support to U.S. and other coalition forces engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Since the MSDF deployment clearly made Japan an active participant in a collective defense enterprise, one might have expected strong voices of disapproval from Japanese pacifists and constitutional "strict constructionists." In fact, however, domestic opposition was relatively muted and the Diet — acting with unusual speed — passed enabling legislation for a watered down version of Koizumi's original package in October 2001.

One factor facilitating Japanese acceptance of this package was the persuasiveness of the warning put forward by its proponents that doing less would invite a repeat of the international derision evoked by Japan's unwillingness to commit the SDF to the support of Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Another was Koizumi's success in winning Chinese and ROK acquiescence, which he accomplished by visiting Beijing and Seoul and extending unusually profuse apologies for Japan's historical misdeeds. Most important, however, was his mollification of domestic critics with the argument that Japan's support of Operation Enduring Freedom was not an exercise in collective defense, but rather an independent initiative undertaken in response to the UN's call for forceful action by its members to meet the threat of global terrorism. Koizumi further appeased potential opponents by promising not to violate Japan's constitutional stricture against the use of military force for reasons other than self-defense. (The MSDF ships were, for example, to be kept well out of harm's way and limited to relatively innocuous activities such as refueling.) On the basis of these assurances, Diet debate centered on defining the range of legally permissible activities in which the SDF might engage. To Washington's disappointment, some of the bolder elements of Koizumi's package fell by the wayside. The most prominent of these was the inclusion of Aegis destroyers, which was nixed on the grounds that their advanced surveillance capabilities might be used to support U.S. combat operation — as if conventional Japanese destroyers lack surveillance capabilities and do not share information with American forces.

TOKENISM OR BREAKTHROUGH?

The equivocal nature of Japan's military contribution to Operation Enduring Freedom naturally gave rise to divergent interpretations of its significance. Critics pointed out — correctly — that it was largely symbolic and involved no abandonment of Japan's formal constitutional rejection of collective defense. Indeed, some went so far as to suggest that it was a smoke-and-mirrors exercise designed to placate American opinion while preserving Japan's long-standing pacifist and mercantilist priorities. Other observers detected a sea change in Japanese attitudes toward acceptance of collective defense and the use of military force beyond self-defense. The latter interpretation comes closer to capturing the significance of Japan's "change-within-continuity" approach that Koizumi clearly was pursuing. As previously noted, the essence of this approach is the cloaking of moves toward collective defense with the trappings of constitutional orthodoxy. The resulting appearance of non-change can be deceiving. Whatever the rationale offered or the restrictions imposed, a Japanese naval task force is supporting the United States in an overseas military conflict — a turn of events unimaginable ten or even five years ago. Furthermore, whether or not most Japanese recognize such support as an exercise in collective defense and alliance solidarity, they accept it as legitimate and are therefore more inclined to accept similar or even bolder initiatives in the future. This being said, Japan is still a long way from explicitly embracing collective defense, and its military backing of Operation Enduring Freedom is probably best seen as an incremental step in a process likely to require many more years.

DEEPENING BILATERAL COOPERATION

Given earlier American doubts about Koizumi, Washington had reason to be surprised and pleased by his success in delivering an unexpectedly robust Japanese contribution to Operation Enduring Freedom. For some, an opportunity seemed to be at hand for accelerating Japan's evolution into a stronger and more self-confident ally. The Bush administration's game plan for nudging Japan in this direction wisely eschewed heavy-handed "gaiatsu" (external pressure) in favor of quiet diplomacy and positive reinforcement — an approach that enabled Koizumi to stress the independent character of his initiatives and parry charges of his subservience to Washington. (This approach also dampened Japanese criticism of American "unilateralism.") Bilateral cooperation in the war on terrorism consequently deepened. With Washington's encouragement, for example, Japan hosted an international conference on Afghan reconstruction in January 2002. The Diet meanwhile twice extended the October 2001 antiterrorism legislation providing for the stationing of MSDF ships in the Indian Ocean. In December 2002, moreover, Tokyo finally overcame its qualms about the dispatch of Aegis destroyers and the first departed for the Indian Ocean, reportedly to take over surveillance duties from similarly equipped U. S. ships. Also, the looming prospect of American military action against Iraq inspired active discussion within the Koizumi government of ways that Japan might support the United States. Like many other American allies and friends, Japan has not bought off on the idea that the Iraqi regime constitutes a sufficiently serious threat to justify war. Direct SDF logistical support in the manner of Operation Enduring Freedom is therefore unlikely, particularly if the UN does not endorse military action. Nevertheless, at the beginning of 2003 Tokyo was canvassing other means of "showing the flag" and providing at least indirect support for American forces, such as the dispatch of MSDF warships to protect Japanese shipping in the Gulf.

THE LIMITS TO COOPERATION

If Washington could take satisfaction in the development of U.S.-Japan cooperation in the war on terrorism, progress on other fronts deemed important to the reinvigoration of the Alliance was more disappointing. Koizumi's economic reforms are largely stalled, for example, the victim of resistance by vested interests, including the LDP's Old Guard, as well as the Japanese public's unwillingness to bear the socioeconomic pain entailed by many of his proposed reforms. (One by-product of Koizumi's meager accomplishments in this area was a decline in his public approval ratings in early 2002, a trend accelerated by his firing in January 2002 of his popular but eccentric and obstreperous foreign minister, Makiko Tanaka.) Having foresworn "gaiatsu," Washington seemed at loss as to how it might help put Koizumi's economic reforms on track other than merely voicing continued support for them and for Koizumi himself.

The Bush administration was also discomfited by Koizumi's continued reluctance to commit to its missile defense plan. Tokyo's misgivings about the plan's cost and technical feasibility interacted with other concerns. Many saw the linking of Japan's defense to that of the United States as a violation of its constitutional prohibition of collective defense. Others worried about the impact of this move on Japan's relations with China, its arms control priorities, and its independence, real and perceived, vis-à-vis the United States. By the end of 2002, however, the plan's advocates were gaining ground. For one thing, Washington seemed determined to proceed with or without Japan's participation. For

another, Japanese fears of the North Korean threat were reawakened by Pyongyang's October 2002 revelation that it a was clandestinely pursuing a nuclear weapons program, and by its ominous hints that it might not extend its missile testing moratorium.

North Korea's nuclear defiance wrote an embarrassing finis to Koizumi's attempt to jump-start Japan-DPRK normalization by meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in September 2002. Although Washington refrained from publicly voicing its disapproval, it can hardly have welcomed Koizumi's venture in summitry with East Asia's member of the "Axis of Evil," particularly since he played down American nuclear and missile proliferation concerns in his eagerness to cut a deal with Kim. Even if Pyongyang had not resorted to nuclear saber rattling, this deal might have unraveled as a result of friction over the status of Japanese abductees. Tokyo has, in any case, returned to the fold and is currently supporting U.S. efforts to pressure North Korea into abandoning its nuclear ambitions. The summit episode nevertheless underscores a certain disconnect between Japanese and American foreign policy priorities as well as Koizumi's propensity for unpredictable and — from an American point of view — ill-considered initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

The Bush administration's efforts to forge a stronger political-military partnership with Japan have enjoyed some success, largely due to a positive response from Prime Minister Koizumi. The greatest progress has been made in the context of the war on terrorism, the most notable accomplishment of which is Japan's unprecedented naval deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. While this move reflects an important shift in Japanese attitudes toward acceptance of collective defense and military force, its significance should not be exaggerated. Japan's metamorphosis into the "Britain of East Asia" is still at best a distant prospect and perhaps even a mirage. Japan has not yet accepted the legitimacy of collective defense and is in no hurry to do so, preferring incremental steps in this direction camouflaged by the appearance of continuity with its "self-defense only" position.

As is suggested by Tokyo's waffling on missile defense, moreover, there is no consensus on the desirability of a closer strategic embrace with the United States. Japan is divided over the course it should follow to assure its national security and, indeed, over the larger question of its proper role and "place" in the world. None of this precludes Japan's continued evolution into a "normal country" and a stronger, more self-confident ally, but it points to the necessity of guarding against unrealistic expectations. The danger lies in misreading Japan's willingness to shoulder the risks of collective defense in the event of a full-blown military crisis on the Korean peninsula or in the Taiwan Strait. It is currently unprepared — both psychologically and politically — to offer the level of military support to the United States that the American public and Congress would consider minimally acceptable. One can only hope that such a crisis does not put the U.S. Japan partnership to the test.

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