

# **An Illiberal Hegemon or An Understanding Partner?**

## **Japanese Views of the United States in the Post-Cold War Era**

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### **Introduction**

Many Japanese today find no compelling reason why they should expect the United States to continue to provide for Japan's security as generously as it did in the past; nor do they see any convincing evidence that the US-Japan alliance can guarantee the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region as their government would like to have them believe. Current Japanese views of the United States are inextricably linked to their agonizing search for a credible and legitimate place in the post-Cold War world. Their perspectives are also influenced by their expectations regarding the United States' role in the development, which many Japanese find desirable if not entirely possible, of an Asia-Pacific community occupying a common civilizational space, anchored on a stable system of political relations, and connected by growing webs of economic interdependence.

Japan's view of the United States in the postwar era has evolved through several phases. In the first, immediate postwar years, Japan was a vanquished nation whose economic reconstruction and political reintegration into the world were at the mercy of the United States. With the onset of the Cold War in Asia, the overwhelmingly powerful United States brought the totally vulnerable Japan into its strategic fold by concluding a mutual security treaty in 1951 which committed the United States to protect Japan with no reciprocal role for Japan. In 1960, the two countries replaced the one-sided treaty with a new one which committed Japan to upgrade its own defense capabilities and assist the United States in defending Japan and ensuring the security of the Far East. During the third phase, roughly from the end of the 1960s to the end of the 1970s, Japan slowly awakened to the role of a "junior partner," acknowledging the US-Japan relationship as an "alliance" and proceeding with defense buildup. In the 1980s, Japan entered its fourth phase as a full-fledged member of the "Western alliance" against the Soviet Union and responded favorably if grudgingly to the US call for expanded burden sharing.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s thrust Japan into its current phase. Japan is in need of a strategic rationale for its alliance with the United States that can survive the disappearance of the Soviet threat and deal with the emerging security issues in the Asia-Pacific region, including the growing Chinese power and independently-minded Taiwan, the disintegrating Russia and its desperate efforts to sell arms for hard currency or for debt payment, and the stalemate on the Korean peninsula and the dangerously isolated North Korea.

### **The US-Japan Security Treaty System**

At the core of the Japanese view of the United States today is their understanding of what they call "*ampo taisei*" (the US-Japan security treaty system), the bilateral alliance based legally on the mutual security treaty, buttressed by domestic and bilateral political institutions, and serving the interests of the two largest capitalist economies of the world. The system was born of the US Cold War strategy in East Asia and the Pacific, as an instrument of the US containment policy against the Soviet Union and international Communism. At the height of the Cold War and through the periods of East-West detente, the alliance survived all ideologically inspired challenges from the left and the right and overcame economically motivated criticisms from both sides of the Pacific. So long as the alliance's Cold War rationale was powerful enough and its tangible and intangible benefits compelling enough, the system could and did withstand myriad challenges, be they the US criticism of Japanese "free-riding" or Japanese charges of hegemonic dominance by the United States.

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the very strategic rationale of the bilateral alliance has disappeared and this raised and continues to raise serious questions about the viability of the alliance, not to mention the costs and benefits of maintaining the security treaty to the respective countries. Moreover, the Gulf War, the first regional conflict in the post-Cold War era directly affecting the interests of both the United States and Japan, forced the two countries to find a common understanding of the relevance of the bilateral alliance to post-Cold War security challenges.

Washington's response to these challenges has been to redefine the strategic purpose of the security treaty and to demand larger operational roles and logistic responsibilities on the part of Japan not only for its own defense but, more importantly, for the region's security as well. Tokyo's response has been to accept Washington's demands. In 1996, Washington and Tokyo reaffirmed their bilateral alliance and declared its centrality to the national interests of the two countries and to the peace and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region. They have given substance to the declaration by adopting in 1997 a new Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation to replace its 1978 predecessor. The new document obligates Japan to step up cooperation with the United States in defense planning in peace time and in operational functions in regional contingencies that may threaten Japan's security. The Japanese government has introduced a bill that would enable it to carry out its operational and logistical responsibilities under the new defense guidelines.

### **Globalists, Regionalists, and Nationalists**

The end of the Cold War has not fundamentally altered the power relationship between the United States and Japan with respect to the bilateral security treaty system. However, there are voices of discontent in Japan and they come from competing perspectives. A complex mix of globalist perspectives, regionalist sentiments, and nationalist impulses informs the Japanese debate on their relations with the United States. This is generating competing and conflicting views of Japan and of the United States.

Many globalists believe that Japan must play much more visible and substantial global roles but that it should continue to pursue the pacifist foreign policy it has followed since its defeat in the Second World War. Most of them believe that Japan should maintain its alliance with the United States but continue to eschew the projection of its military power beyond its borders. Some globalists part company by seeing as virtually inevitable the termination of the US-Japan security treaty, if not immediately but over some period of adjustment. These two globalist schools of thought agree that Japan should maintain its self-imposed denial of the right to collective security. In essence, they advocate a global division of labor between the United States, Japan, and Europe, with Japan limiting its international security role to economic development assistance and non-combatant functions in UN peacekeeping. Their argument is based on two premises: that economic development in the developing world and in transition economies would lead to domestic and international political stability and that international economic interdependence would enhance prospects for global peace. They share the regionalist view noted below that the Asia-Pacific countries must advance multilateral economic integration as a foundation of regional peace and stability. They want to see the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum move beyond the dialogue phase it is now in and develop clearly defined, if not legally binding principles governing trade, investment, and other economic transactions among the member countries. They also demand that those principles be consistent with the rules of the global trade system under the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Other globalists believe that such a division of labor, especially between the United States and Japan, would be politically untenable in view of the growing isolationist sentiment in the United States. Nor do they believe that it would be desirable for Japan to disavow its responsibility for global peace and security. They assert that it is time for Japan to end its self-imposed ban on participation in collective security and become a "normal state." In their view, a normalized Japan would be able to play an active role in UN peacekeeping operations, including front-line operations, and also develop a more reciprocal relationship with the United States in the bilateral alliance. This view is founded on the realist premise that all great powers inevitably assume political roles commensurate with their economic power and that they require and eventually acquire well developed military capabilities to exercise effective political influence in the anarchic world. In the regional context, these globalists assume that a new balance of power is emerging in the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific and that Japan, whether by itself or, more realistically, in concert with the United States, should deter the emergence of an unfriendly regional hegemon, e.g., China. Although they do not necessarily see rivalry with China as an inevitable outcome of the end of the Cold War, they see it as a distinct possibility. Other realists are less inclined to invest in the UN and other global institutions and advocate a balance-of-power or "bandwagoning" cooperation with the only remaining superpower, the United States.

Regionalists are critical of what they see as their government's uncritical dependence on the alliance with the United States and are hopeful that the growing economic interdependence in the Asia-Pacific region will facilitate more friendly relations among the countries of the region, particularly between Japan and China. In their view, political reconciliation and economic interdependence with China and other Asian countries, not enhanced defense cooperation with the United States, will ensure Japan's peace and prosperity. From their perspective, Washington's aggressive human rights policy toward China and its demand for accelerated liberalization of Asian markets are both self-centered and even counterproductive. While they may not necessarily agree that there is an Asian model of political and economic development, they object to Washington's sanctions policy as part of its democratization and market-opening policies. In this, they have something in common with regionalists in other Asian countries, such as Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad. However, they do not support an Asians-only regional framework, such as the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) proposed by the Malaysian Prime Minister. Instead, they want the APEC process to succeed in advancing the cause of regional economic cooperation, but they want the process to move slowly and decisions made on the basis of consensus. In the security realm, Japanese regionalists do not see any viable alternative to the US-Japan alliance, at least in the foreseeable future, but they recognize the need to develop a multilateral security framework to supplement the US-Japan bilateral alliance. They advocate, therefore, the development of regional institutions for confidence-building and economic cooperation.

Nationalist themes also appear in the domestic debate over Japan's role in the world. The themes do not coalesce into any coherent system of thought or policy prescriptions that depart radically from the government's current policy. Instead, they typically appear as impulsive reactions to international criticisms of Japan and its policies. Nationalist sentiments find their expressions in the prickly debate over defense burden sharing with the United States, the protracted legislative initiatives to authorize Japanese participation in UN peacekeeping operations, and the discussion of how to respond to Chinese and Korean criticisms of Japan's militarist-imperialist past. Nationalist impulses also push the debate over domestic market opening, financial deregulation, and international environmental policy.

Japanese nationalist sensitivities have been aroused by Washington's persistent demand, beginning in the 1970s, for larger Japanese burden for their own national defense. On the one hand, it is unlikely that without the US prodding Japan would have built up its defense capabilities to the current level, over \$50 billion and the third largest in the world, after the United States and Russia. Today, Japan has more major naval vessels than the US Seventh Fleet and all of them are technologically more advanced than their neighbors'. On the other hand, Japanese nationalists have been visibly critical of the US-Japan agreement on the joint development of FSX fighter aircraft which they believe was an unfair deal. As well, they have resented the increasing host-nation support that Washington has demanded from Tokyo for maintaining the US military presence in Japan.

One nationalist has persistently argued that Japan should reject the US pressure on the nation to change its ways and advocated an independent, autonomous path toward the status of great world power that Japan deserves. He has proposed that Japan threaten to scrap the US-Japan security treaty if Washington continues to pressure Tokyo to change its successful industrial policy and

open its already competitive domestic market to US products to reduce the burgeoning bilateral trade imbalance when, in his opinion, the United States is to blame for much of the trade gap. Although the termination of the security treaty would be too radical a move for most Japanese to endorse, they share the nationalist's resentment against *gaiatsu*, external pressure.

Washington's inability to reduce its public debt, the US industry's failure to develop a long-term strategy for global competition, American consumers' failure to save rather than spend have long been targets of ridicule and attack by Japanese, nationalists, regionalists, and globalists alike. The growing anti-American sentiment among the Japanese has been captured by the concept of *kenbei*, literally meaning the "dislike of America." Japanese criticisms of the US economic policy have subsided in recent years as the Japanese find themselves unable to escape the suffocating effects of their government's failure to manage their post-bubble economy. Their targets of criticism are now their own corrupt politicians, inept bureaucrats, and business leaders who, in their view, have caused the "hollowing out" of Japanese economy. However, the nationalist sentiments that were visible in the pre-bubble domestic debate are certain to resurface once the Japanese put their own house in order. Moreover, nationalist sentiments are echoing in the growing exchange of views among Asian intellectuals. An example is the publication of "The Asia That Can Say 'No'," in which Shintaro Ishihara and Malaysia Prime Minister Mahathir discuss how Asia should forge a common strategy against what they see as a misguided and misinformed attack on the cultural values and indigenous institutions of Asian countries.

### **Declining US Hegemony**

Although globalist, regionalist, and nationalist perspectives and impulses inform the domestic debate and push it in competing and contradictory directions, they share one thing in common. They are all based on the premise that the United States is no longer the global hegemon that it once was and that the management of world affairs today and in the future requires the sharing of power and responsibilities among the great powers, including Japan, Europe, and the United States. They differ, however, over where Japan's priorities should be, whether they should concentrate on global partnerships with the United States and Europe, invest in reconciliation and accommodation with their Asian neighbors, or focus on the search for a uniquely Japanese identity in the post-Cold War. As I have argued elsewhere, the outcome of this debate is likely to be a mixture of these competing perspectives, the balance among them depending on the issues the nation is faced with at any given moment. However, how the Japanese will frame their major issues, particularly important foreign policy issues, will be informed first and foremost by their view of their relations with the United States.

Of particular importance at this moment is the lasting effect of the shifting balance of economic power between the United States and Japan, which began to show its visible signs as early as in the late 1960s. By the mid-1970s, when the United States withdrew from Vietnam, most Japanese intellectuals had come to accept the premise that the United States was no longer the hegemon, benevolent or otherwise, that it once was and that the world was entering a post-hegemonic era. This view has not changed even after the US "victory" over its ideological-strategic rival, the Soviet Union. The economics-dominant conception of the world that the Japanese have long held since their postwar reconstruction continues to be an important source of their contemporary understanding of national power and international relations.

There are unsettling doubts among the Japanese, particularly among those of globalist and regionalist persuasions, about the viability of a post-Cold War world order dependent on what they see as a declining hegemon determined but unable to lead the world. They point to the Clinton Administration's inability to secure congressional approval of US financial contributions to the UN budget and Washington's failure to lead the international debate on UN reforms, including the question of Japan's permanent seat on the Security Council. Most particularly, the Japanese are disturbed by the visible division among the current permanent members of the Security Council over the United Nations' role in settling regional conflicts and preventing the proliferation of missiles and nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. The Japanese government stood by the United States in the moments of crisis over Saddam Hussein's defiance of the UN resolutions demanding access to military sites for UN inspection teams. The public were deeply troubled by the US threat to launch a military strike against the recalcitrant Iraqi government, but neither were they confident that the Russian and French diplomatic efforts would succeed in breaking the deadlock. Foremost among their concerns was the very real possibility that if the United States carried out its attack on Baghdad, Japan would come under pressure to support the US policy in a much more visible and costly way than during the Gulf War. Still fresh in their memory was the humiliation they had suffered from the stinging international criticism of Tokyo's "checkbook diplomacy" in the 1991 crisis. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, Tokyo managed to pass legislation authorizing the dispatch of Japanese Self-Defense Force personnel to UN peacekeeping and disaster relief missions and did so in Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique, El Salvador, Zaire, and Kenya. Tokyo would have found itself in a serious dilemma, however, if the United States had carried out a military strike against Iraq over the objection of Russia, France, or China and no solid international coalition had emerged. It would have exposed the vulnerability of the United Nations to big power disagreements at the very time when Tokyo was trying to convince the Japanese public how important it was for them to support the peacekeeping function of the world organization.

As unsettling as the prospects for a leaderless post-Cold War world may be, the Japanese are resigned to the fact that they have no choice but to rely on US leadership where it does exist. This is illustrated by Tokyo's support for and participation in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) established as a result of the successful US effort to suspend North Korea's nuclear weapons development. Although there was some resentment against the almost "matter-of-course" manner in which Washington called on Japan to provide a major financial contribution to the new organization, the Japanese appreciated the fact that the US-DPRK Agreed Framework had brought the nuclear crisis to an end, even an uneasy one. Tokyo's support for the extension of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) also illustrates Japan's willingness to cooperate with the United States on global security issues. However, Tokyo no longer hesitates to part company with Washington on issues about which it feels very strongly. Tokyo therefore defied Washington's pressure and decided to join the international ban on anti-personnel land-mines. Such an action would have had a very disturbing impact on the US-Japan relations during the Cold War, especially in view of the fact that one of the main reasons why the United States has not signed the land-mine treaty is that it would compromise US military options against a North Korea invasion of South Korea, a possibility that some Japanese do not rule out.

## **Conclusion**

The official policy of the Japanese government is an amalgam of the contending perspectives outlined above. Tokyo is determined to continue to anchor its security policy on the bilateral alliance with Washington while at the same time exploring possible modes of multilateral security cooperation, not to replace but to supplement the US-Japan alliance. While reaffirming the bilateral alliance with the United States and further expanding its contribution to the effective functioning of the alliance, Japan has also begun to take some initiatives to develop security dialogue and defense cooperation with the neighboring countries. Tokyo was instrumental in the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Tokyo has also shown increasing interest in expanding security consultations with South Korea, developing defense cooperation with Russia, and initiating defense dialogue with China. The Japanese government is also supportive of the track-two diplomacy for exploring various confidence-building measures.

Should Washington and Tokyo fail in maintaining the US-Japan Security Treaty System or developing a multilateral security framework to either supplement or replace the bilateral alliance, there would be only unsettling options for Tokyo. They are: (1) accommodation with Beijing to neutralize China's possible hostility, (2) a strategic partnership with Moscow to counter China's growing power, (3) a concert of powers among the United States, Japan, China, and Russia, and (4) defense buildup and independent security policy.

Accommodation with China would likely reduce Japan's already dubious influence in China over such issues as human rights, defense buildup, arms export, and even territorial demands on its neighbors, possibly compromising Japan's own claims to the Senkaku (Tiaoyu) island. As well, it would increase Japan's financial burden to support China's economic development, which would further strengthen China's national power and weaken Tokyo's leverage over Beijing. More importantly, Japanese-Chinese accommodation of this magnitude might seriously undermine Japan's relations with the United States, politically and economically.

A strategic partnership with Moscow that could balance China's growing power would require a full settlement of the Russo-Japanese dispute over the Northern Territories (southern Kuriles), not an assured prospect despite the visibly improving relationship between Moscow and Tokyo since 1997. Even if the two countries were able to find a mutually acceptable solution to the territorial dispute, a full-fledged strategic partnership between Tokyo and Moscow would likely entail a substantial burden on Japan: massive economic aid to the struggling Russian economy and equally substantial Japanese investment in the fledgling markets, a risk that most Japanese businesses would like to avoid.

A concert of great powers, involving the United States, Japan, China, and Russia, would require an unprecedented convergence of future visions among these powers. Given Japan's historical aversion to a balance-of-power-based political order in Asia, it would be surprising if Tokyo chose this option over the others.

Finally, Japan's military aggrandizement would be equally problematic. It is true that Japan has developed substantial military capabilities through direct arms purchases from the United States, defense technology cooperation with the United States, and the research and development program of its own. The experience the Japanese defense industry has thus gained is varied enough and advanced enough to provide Tokyo with some powerful indigenously developed

military hardware. However, such an independent move on the part of Japan would almost certainly mean the end of Japanese access to US weapons technology. Japan would have to finance its military buildup entirely on its own. This would tempt Japan to go nuclear, but such a prospect would surely frighten its neighbors into a coalition against Japan. Tokyo's decision to abandon its three nonnuclear principles and to develop nuclear weapons would polarize and destabilize the country where pacifism and anti-nuclear sentiments run deep.

Clearly, then, Tokyo's best alternative is to continue with its alliance with the United States and, where the bilateral cooperation is inadequate in meeting the post-Cold War regional security requirements, to develop bilateral and multilateral security dialogue and consultations with the other countries of the region. This indeed is the alternative Tokyo has decided to pursue toward the twenty-first century.

What should Washington do to keep its alliance with Tokyo intact and to use it as an anchor, if not the only anchor of US strategy in the Asia-Pacific region in the next century? It should encourage Japan to engage the other Asian powers in the development of bilateral defense cooperation and multilateral security dialogue and consultations. It should discourage the formation of an alliance or a coalition, bilateral or multilateral, that could threaten others in the region. Washington should find a politically sustainable formula for a division of labor in securing the region's peace and stability; it should encourage Tokyo to do what it does best, to continue its soft approach to the region's peace and stability, through its economic assistance to developing and transition economies and by limiting its military capabilities to those necessary for strictly defensive purposes. It should not try to impose an anachronistic image of a "normal state" upon the unwilling ally to the detriment of long-cultivated bilateral trust. Above all, it should eschew unilateralism and promote closer consultations with Tokyo, bilaterally and in multilateral fora.

Washington should apply the same tenets to its economic policy toward Tokyo. Washington should encourage Tokyo to proceed with the deregulation of industry and liberalization of financial and consumer markets and to demonstrate its commitment to the liberal international economic order. Internationally, Washington should cooperate with Tokyo in advancing the cause the liberal world economy and open regional economies through closer policy coordination in the WTO and APEC, simultaneously pursuing the same principles through NAFTA and encouraging the EU to follow suit. Washington should demonstrate to Tokyo both through words and action that it is no longer a global hegemon, neither benevolent nor self-serving, that it is a constructive, understanding partner. This will go a long way toward alleviating any false misgivings about a declining hegemon lashing out at a junior partner.