

Chapter 41

Reassessing the Security Alliance Between the United States and Japan*

Lieutenant Roger D. Wiegley
JAG Corps, U.S. Navy

While U.S. leverage in Asia can no longer be taken for granted, American policy is still a critical factor in the stability of the area. Some U.S. initiative leading to coordination of that policy with the East Asian policies of Japan seems necessary to promote mutual objectives and to reconcile differences.

The role of the United States in the security of Japan is an issue that has received relatively little official attention, despite significant developments in Northeast Asia over the past decade. These developments, clearly more than isolated or temporary phenomena, are relevant to the U.S.-Japan security alliance in at least three respects. First, the U.S. commitment to Japan has, *in Japan's perception*, lost much of its credibility. Second, improved relations between Japan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) raise the prospect of a shift in the strategic balance of power in Asia. And third, the Soviet Union has significantly increased its use of military forces to exert political pressure on Japan. Each development requires careful examination in terms of its implications for both United States and Japanese interests.

Japan's perception of the American commitment in Asia has been shaken by a series of dramatic events over the past 10 years. Beginning with the 1969 "Nixon Doctrine," which stated that conventional Asian wars would thereafter be fought by Asians, Japan witnessed the evolution of the U.S. policy of withdrawal from Vietnam. Initially, Tokyo's reaction to the U.S. withdrawal was muted, largely because U.S. pronouncements on military policy indicated a shift in emphasis toward clearly identifiable American interests—such as the security of Japan. Then, early in 1977, at the very outset of his administration, President Carter announced that American ground forces would be withdrawn from South Korea. The change in U.S. policy toward Korea caused considerable apprehension in Tokyo despite assurances from Washington that the United States was not deserting any of its Asian allies. Not surprisingly, many Japanese viewed the announcement of withdrawal from Korea as more indicative of

* Reprinted from the Naval War College Review February 1979.

American policy than promises of future support. Even before the U.S. announcement, the Vice Director of the Japanese Defense Agency stated in an annual Defense white paper (June 1969) that, "the United States has been replaced by the Soviet Union as the predominant military power in the Far East." If Japanese officials believe that the United States is second in strength to the Soviet Union in Asia, they would naturally take a skeptical view of American promises: after all, how sincere can the commitment be if the United States is willing to withdraw forces from Korea in the face of Soviet predominance?

More recent events have not been lost on Japanese observers either, such as Washington's apparent preoccupation with the security of Western Europe. In a recently delivered paper, a Japanese professor of international relations began by quoting the following statement by General Brown, Chairman of JCS, to the U.S. Congress:

At current levels of force structure, war in Europe would require the great preponderance of U.S. general purpose forces. Deployment of a significant portion of the Pacific Command's naval resources to the Atlantic may be required. If this were to occur, control of the seas between the continental United States and Hawaii could be maintained, as could the sea lanes between Alaska and the Lower Forty Eight. However, broad sea control beyond those lanes would be a difficult challenge. Forces of all Services available for other contingencies and crises—for example, war in the Middle East or on the Korean Peninsula—would be seriously reduced.¹

The effect of such statements by high-level American officials should not be underestimated, especially when made to Congress. Whatever congressional hearings may mean to Americans, they are watched closely by foreign observers for signs of future U.S. policies. For example, it is unlikely that Tokyo failed to notice that Secretary of State Vance, in a February 1978 synopsis of U.S. foreign policy presented to the House International Relations Committee, did not even make reference to Asia.

A second perception evolving in Japan is that the U.S. Congress wants Tokyo to assume a greater share of Japan's defense burden.² Undoubtedly, there is some support in Congress for such a move, but the idea will almost certainly not gain momentum without support from the Department of Defense—an unlikely prospect for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, it is easy to see how Japanese authorities might view discontented Congressmen as harbingers of a reduction in the U.S. contribution to Japan's defense.

Also important in Japan's perception of the U.S. commitment to East Asia is its view of U.S. policies toward the PRC and the Soviet Union. When the United States first made overtures toward Peking in 1971, the Japanese Government was surprised and offended by Washington's failure to consult with Tokyo in advance (the shift in U.S. policy was dubbed by the Japanese press as "Nixon's

shock”³). The diplomatic wounds have largely healed, partly as a result of improved relations between Tokyo and Peking, but Japan is undoubtedly concerned about the future of America’s new Asian policies. For example, a desire for full diplomatic relations with the PRC could cause the United States to abandon its relationship with Taiwan. If that were to occur, Japan’s economic links with the Taiwan Government would be jeopardized and, not incidentally, the level of U.S. forces in East Asia would be reduced even further. Moreover, some Japanese analysts may be concerned that U.S.-Soviet détente will cause Washington to reduce its forces in East Asia as part of an agreement, or to improve relations, with Moscow.

Such possibilities as these must loom large in Japan’s perception, if only because the United States acted so unpredictably in 1971. It is therefore likely that Japanese policymakers are particularly sensitive to the prospect of U.S. political objectives that would affect Japan’s security interests adversely. Once such suspicions are formed, insignificant acts by the United States are apt to be viewed as index of an unwelcome trend, thereby eroding Japan’s belief in the U.S. commitment for reasons Americans would not readily recognize. The problem, then, cannot be understood simply by examining Japan’s reaction to observable events; it is also necessary to consider that Tokyo may have unvoiced concerns about possible shifts in U.S. Asian policy that would subvert Japan’s interests for other U.S. objectives.

The foregoing discussion of Japan’s perception of the U.S. commitment has obviously been oversimplified. Nations do not perceive anything—people do. Undoubtedly, there is within Japan a wide range of opinions, held with varying degrees of certainty, concerning U.S. intentions. The point, however, is that an increasing number of Japanese are forming doubts about the U.S. commitment, and even those with the most faith in the U.S.-Japan alliance are probably less convinced than they once were. As will be discussed later, these doubts can lead to a national policy that undermines U.S. interests, and they should be dealt with accordingly.

The second major development in East Asia has been the improvement in relations between Japan and the PRC. Tokyo officially recognized the PRC in 1972, shortly after President Nixon’s initial trip to Peking, although informal discussions between the two countries had begun in the early sixties. Like the United States, Japan welcomed the opportunity to establish a dialogue with an emerging Communist power. Moreover, Japan was, and is, anxious to establish itself as the primary source of technology and capital for an economy with a prodigious growth potential.

The relationship between Japan and the PRC shows signs of developing into a political alignment with very important strategic implications. In August 1978 the two countries signed a symbolic pact called a “peace and friendship treaty” that called for the peaceful settlement of any disputes between them. Significantly, the

Japan-PRC treaty also contains a clause opposing "hegemony" in Asia by any nation—an unmistakable reference to the Soviet Union. Initially, Japan would not sign the treaty because the antihegemony clause provoked a very hostile reaction in Moscow. Not only did the Soviets denounce the treaty, but they repeatedly warned of a reassessment of their policy toward Japan if the latter signed a treaty containing the objectionable clause. China refused to remove the antihegemony clause and a 3-year impasse in treaty negotiations ensued. Finally, Japan agreed to accept the antihegemony clause, although it insisted on an additional clause stating that the treaty did not affect either party's relations with third countries. The compromise solution, if it can be called a compromise, was still a diplomatic victory for the PRC, and the Soviets were predictably upset. Statements in the official Soviet press warned of the treaty's "dangerous character," and the Soviet Ambassador to Japan returned to Moscow for an unusually prolonged stay of 4 months.

The Soviet Union is deeply concerned about the prospects of Sino-Japanese accord. Such accord would not only accelerate the PRC's industrial development, but it would also facilitate what the Soviets view as the ultimate PRC goal of replacing the United States as Japan's protection against the Soviet threat.⁴ Soviet fears may be overdrawn, but they are not baseless. As Japan and the PRC strengthen their political and economic ties, the latter will probably become more and more vocal in support of Japan's security interests. This, in turn, could cause Tokyo to view Peking's aggressive anti-Soviet policy as the most effective counterforce against Soviet influence.

The problem for Japan is a delicate one: how to cultivate its relationship with China without unduly antagonizing the Soviet Union. If Moscow perceives that Japan is encouraging China's anti-Soviet objectives, Japan is likely to experience a much greater Soviet threat than it must cope with at present. Needless to say, such an escalation of tensions would put the United States right in the middle of a difficult situation.

Fortunately, the United States need not wait and watch while events unfold in East Asia. American policy is still a critical factor in the stability, or instability, of the area. Particularly important is the U.S. relationship with Japan, because American support can enable Japan to move away from PRC influence if circumstances require it. Furthermore, U.S. attitudes toward the PRC and the Soviet Union can affect Japan's relations with those two countries, assuming that the U.S.-Japan alliance remains essentially unchanged. U.S. leverage in Asian affairs cannot be taken for granted, however. It is essential that the United States coordinate its East Asian policy with that of Japan. Unless Tokyo and Washington undertake to promote mutual objectives, the two Governments may find themselves pursuing Asian policies that are not complementary. To avoid such a situation, the United States should take the initiative now to discuss with Japan

the best ways to advance common interests and reconcile those that are in conflict.

The third major development mentioned at the outset has been the increase in Soviet efforts to exert political pressure on Japan through the use of military forces. These Soviet efforts are significant because they affect Japan's perception of the Soviet threat and, hence, Japan's view of the adequacy of American support.

In April 1975, during the worldwide Soviet *Okean II* exercise, four Russian naval task forces were deployed around Japan, two of them on important Japanese trading routes. A year later Soviet warships sailed south through the Sea of Japan while Soviet reconnaissance aircraft flew a parallel course along both sides of Japan's home islands.⁵ In 1977, Soviet military aircraft made nearly 200 "abnormal demonstrative flights" near Japan's airspace, including 30 flights that circled Japan.⁶ Also in 1977 the Soviets conducted numerous naval maneuvers in the Sea of Japan.⁷

Such displays of Soviet military force are not Japan's only concern. Equally important in terms of political effect is the so-called "Northern Territories" problem. The Northern Territories are the four islands just north of the main Japanese island of Hokkaido that are claimed by both Japan and the Soviet Union (Etorufu, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and the Habomai group). The islands were occupied by Soviet forces at the end of World War II and the Soviets have been in possession ever since. Japan, which held undisputed title to the islands from 1855 to 1945,⁸ claims that the Soviet annexation was illegal under the terms and principles governing boundary settlements after the war. The Soviets have been consistently inflexible in their view: the territorial issue is not negotiable.

The problem of the Northern Territories is significant for political, economic, and military reasons. Mere discussion of the problem arouses strong feelings of Japanese nationalism. In fact, the dispute has been a major obstacle to a peace and friendship treaty between Japan and the U.S.S.R., despite the fact that the two countries have had diplomatic relations since 1965. Moreover, the issue is becoming more sensitive as competition between Japanese and Soviet fishermen increases. The Northern Territories are surrounded by a very fertile fishery, and Japan has been forced to negotiate for limited fishing rights in what used to be traditional Japanese fishing grounds.⁹ Soviet patrol boats do not hesitate to seize Japanese fishing vessels that either enter territorial seas around the disputed islands or violate the terms that regulate Japanese fishing in the area. Since 1945, some 8,000 Japanese fishermen and 1,000 vessels have been seized by Soviet patrols.¹⁰

Soviet seapower is also evident in the Northern Territories in a different form. A Peking radio broadcast in early 1976, quoting a Japanese fisherman, stated that Soviet planes were based at an airfield on Kunashiri and Soviet warships were anchored at Hittokappu Bay, Etorufu Island.¹¹ The strategic significance of the Northern Territories is undoubtedly well-known to the Soviets: the islands

overlook three straits into the Sea of Okhotsk (or three straits into the Pacific Ocean, depending on one's Perspective). Furthermore, the Soviet military presence north of Japan serves as a constant reminder to Tokyo that in the event of a major war the Soviets would almost certainly use the islands to launch an invasion against Japan's northern island of Hokkaido.¹²

It is not likely that the demonstrations of Soviet military strength enumerated above will decrease in the future. Such uses of seapower are consistent with the Soviet philosophy that the peacetime role of the Navy is to display the military might of the Soviet Union and thereby assist in the conduct and support of foreign policy. Japan, with its dependence on seaborne commerce and its strategic location, is particularly vulnerable to the peacetime applications of naval force advocated by the Soviet's influential Admiral Gorshkov:

Demonstrative actions of the fleet in many cases make it possible to achieve political goals without resorting to armed conflict by just indicating pressure by their potential might and the threat of beginning military actions.¹³

Given the prospect of a growing Soviet presence, the question for Tokyo—and Washington—is how to deal with the external pressure that is clearly designed to influence Japan whenever it makes decisions affecting Soviet interests.

Before discussing the role of the United States, it is important to consider two options that Japan might pursue if it loses faith in American support: rearmament and neutrality. The latter option, with certain qualifications, is the more likely of the two, but neither is so improbable that it can be ignored.

A number of knowledgeable observers have predicted that the rearmament of Japan would be an inevitable reaction to a decline in U.S. support. Notable among these observers is Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security advisor, who, writing as an academic in 1972, expressed the view that a U.S. policy of isolation would compel Japan to develop its own military might, including a nuclear capability.¹⁴ Other writers have taken a similar position, including the belief that rearmament would necessarily mean the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan.¹⁵ Reasons offered to support predictions of rearmament have included Japan's need to balance the Soviet threat, a perception by the Japanese that economic success entitles them to a larger voice in world affairs, and a growing sense of nationalism and self-confidence in Japan. While such influences cannot be denied, they are considerably less significant than the factors militating against rearmament.

Two frequently cited indexes of anti-militarism in Japan are public opinion polls and the strength of "passivist" political factions. Such statistical indicators, while they may reflect the national mood at a given time, provide an unreliable basis for predicting future trends. They are effects rather than causes. It is more

useful to consider the advantages Japan has enjoyed as a result of low defense budgets and to compare the probable consequences of militarization.

The most obvious benefit of Japan's low military profile has been the facilitation of phenomenal economic growth. In the 30-plus years since World War II, Japan has risen from economic impotence to a nation with the world's third largest GNP. While Japan's growth cannot be attributed solely to low defense budgets, a contributing factor has certainly been the allocation of funds for industrial development rather than defense. It is apparent to the Japanese that their economic strength has given them more international prestige and a higher standard of living than would have been the case had they devoted a significantly larger share of their national wealth to military development.

A second factor militating against Japan's rearmament is the political instability it would cause in Asia, particularly if Japan were to acquire nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union would no doubt feel threatened, and it would almost certainly intensify its military buildup around Japan. Additionally, smaller nations with whom Japan has trade relations might be alarmed either by the prospect of alienating the Soviet Union or of becoming Japan's "satellites." This, in turn, could cause the smaller nations of Asia to reconsider their own need for more arms or stronger ties with a superpower. And finally, the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan would probably alienate the United States, given the latter's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation,¹⁶ possibly leaving the PRC as the only power to which Japan could turn in the event of a crisis where the nuclear threat was inappropriate. Such reliance on the PRC would be dangerous for Japan because of the risk of a Sino-Soviet rapprochement or, more likely, the development of an intense economic rivalry between China and Japan for markets in Asia.

Based on a rough cost/benefit analysis, then, it seems unlikely that Japan would pursue a policy of rearmament, even to compensate for what was perceived as inadequate American support. Instead, Japan would probably seek an independent role in Asia, with a possible bias toward the PRC. The advantage of such a posture, if it succeeded, would be to allay Soviet fears by reducing the U.S. presence in East Asia. This, according to the plan, would cause the Soviets to abandon their threatening posture toward Japan, assuming the latter could show that it would not permit its friendship with the PRC to support anti-Soviet objectives.

If Japan were to embark on such an independent course, it would almost certainly proceed slowly, not only because of the uncertainties involved but also to minimize the adverse reaction in the United States. Friendship with the United States would retain a high priority in Tokyo's foreign policy, even while Japan was subordinating U.S. interests to the goal of eliminating the Soviet threat. A gradual movement by Japan away from U.S. influence would probably begin with a reduction in the Japanese Self-Defense Force, which is maintained at least

in part to satisfy American preferences,¹⁷ and an announcement that the United States could not use Japanese bases in the event of another Korean war.¹⁸ The latter action may not be as far away as it seems. Article VI of the 1960 "Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between United States and Japan," states that the United States shall have the use of military facilities in Japan to maintain peace and security in the Far East. Significantly, Japan's Foreign Minister Miyazawa asserted in 1975 that North Korea was not included in the "Far East" for purposes of the U.S.-Japan security alliance.¹⁹ While the statement may have been nothing more than a diplomatic gesture designed to improve relations with North Korea, the mere fact that it was made evidences a movement by Tokyo towards a more flexible Asian policy.

It is by no means inevitable that Japan will decide to ease out of its military alliance with the United States. To the contrary, the impetus is still in favor of strong military ties with Washington.²⁰ The United States, however, cannot afford to be complacent or it may witness a shift in Japan's foreign policy as the latter acts on its own to cope with the growing Soviet threat.

In response to what can accurately be called Japan's dilemma, the United States should take three steps. First, it should develop and communicate an Asian policy that demonstrates concern for Japan's needs and interests. Second, the United States should encourage the development of a more effective Japanese Self-Defense Force. And third, economic tensions between Japan and the United States should be dealt with in the overall context of the alliance between the two countries.

In the past, the United States has seemed content to allow world events to shape Japan's foreign policy. Such inattention to Japan's needs and interests is quite idealistic in that it assumes a great deal about future U.S.-Japan relations. Yet those relations are even now showing signs of strain, and the future is not nearly as predictable as it was just a few years ago. Accordingly, the United States should devote more attention to Japan and communicate that attention by coordinating a comprehensive U.S.-Japan Asian policy that addresses the myriad issues of concern to both countries. Such a mutual undertaking would demonstrate the sincerity of the American commitment to Japan and might alleviate some of the problems that have arisen over the last 10 years.

As an additional means of showing support, the United States should address the growing Soviet threat by improving the capabilities of both the 7th Fleet and the Japanese Self-Defense Force. Of course, political constraints in both the United States and Japan limit the available options, but there is still room for applications of technology that will augment the defense and attack capabilities of military forces in Japan. For example, more anti-air and anti-ship missiles would help compensate for the numerical superiority of Soviet forces, and they would require less reaction time in the event of an unexpected crisis. Similarly, computer technology, laser guidance systems, and sophisticated surveillance techniques can

improve military effectiveness without a significant increase in manpower requirements. To be sure, technological advances are already an important component of Japan's defense structure, but the recent increase in Soviet strength suggests that it is necessary to augment Japan's defense with an even more intensive application of the latest U.S. military technology.

Finally, when discussing the U.S.-Japan alliance, it is important to consider economic competition between the two countries. Recent economic trends have not been conducive to harmonious relations, and the chances for improvement are not promising. The United States is presently experiencing a huge trade deficit, largely because of imports from Japan. Moreover, the rising value of the yen in relation to the dollar has increased the cost of maintaining U.S. forces in Japan.

The Japanese also have complaints. Their fishing industry suffered a serious blow in 1977 when the United States put its 200-mile economic zone into effect. Additionally, the decline of the dollar has made Japanese goods more expensive, and hence less competitive, in America.

Clearly, economic tensions between the United States and Japan are not going to disappear. They can, however, be reduced if both countries are willing to discuss the problems and make concessions in the interest of better overall relations. Given the present state of the U.S. economy, Washington would undoubtedly have to accept greater losses than Tokyo, but such losses should be viewed, in the final analysis, as part of the cost of a strong U.S.-Japan alliance.

In summation, the United States is overdue for a thorough reexamination of its role in the security of Japan. The reexamination should be a high-level, mutual effort with Japan aimed at a better understanding and a coordinated policy. At the very least, a concerted effort to deal with Japan's problems and interests would do much to allay Tokyo's present apprehensions about the sincerity of the U.S. commitment to the security of Japan.

Lieutenant Wiegley was assigned to the Naval Legal Services Office, Pearl Harbor, and was an International Law of the Sea Scholar at the University of Hawaii when this article was first published.

Notes

1. Brown, *United States Military Posture for FY 1979*, 17 (January 1978), quoted in MOMOI, *STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTS IN THE NORTH-WESTERN PACIFIC—A JAPANESE PERCEPTION*. (Unpublished. Delivered at Conference on Security and Development in the Indo-Pacific Arena, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Cambridge, Mass., April 1978.)

2. Kaihara, *Japan's Military Capabilities: Realities and Limitations*, *Pacific Community* 132 (January 1978).

3. Seth, *Soviet Image of Japan*, *Pacific Community* 500 (April 1977).

4. *Id.* at 503.

5. Rees, *The Gorshkov Strategy in the Far East*, *Pacific Community* 144 (January 1978).

6. Momoi, *supra* n. 1 at 6.

7. *Id.*

8. Stephan, *The Kurile Islands: Japan Versus Russia*, *Pacific Community* 312-314 (April 1976).

564 Readings on International Law

9. *Soviet Ocean Development*, 314-317 Committee Print, Senate Committee on Commerce, 94th Congress, 2nd Session, pursuant to S. Res. 222 (1976).
10. *Supra* n. 8 at 325.
11. *Supra* n. 5 at 150.
12. SAUNDERS, THE SOVIET NAVY 283 (1958).
13. GORSHKOV, SEA POWER OF THE STATE 312 (1976) (Dep't of the Navy trans.).
14. BRZEZINSKI, THE FRAGILE BLOSSOM 101 (1972).
15. KAHN, THE EMERGING JAPANESE SUPERSTATE 165 (1970); Marks, *The Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons by Japan*, *Military Review* 48 (March 1973); Wakaizumi, *Japan Beyond 1970*, *Foreign Affairs* 517 (April 1969).
16. *Supra* n. 3 at 511.
17. Langer and Moorsteen, *The U.S./Japanese Military Alliance: Japanese Perceptions and the Prospective Impact of Evolving U.S. Military Doctrines and Technologies*, 18 Rand Research Paper P-5393 (Santa Monica, Cal.: Rand).
18. Zumwalt and Bagley, *Strategic Deterioration in the Pacific: The Dilemma for the U.S. and Japan*, *Pacific Community* 125 (January 1978).
19. Barnds, *The United States, Japan and the Korean Peninsula*, *Pacific Community* 76 (October 1976).
20. MOMOI, *supra* n. 1 at 17.