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Japan–U.S. Security Cooperation: A Litmus Test for America’s Commitment to Alliances?

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Japan’s recent initiatives in the security policy sphere seem to reflect both its concerns about the robustness of its alliance with the U.S., and efforts to make the best of the shift in the United States’ interests regarding the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, Japan is aware of the limitations facing the United States, stemming from its reluctance to engage in regional disputes with China and the need for a more frugal approach to its use of financial and military assets. Further cooperation with Japan can be a good measure of the United States’ readiness to reinforce its political guarantees with military capabilities at a time of shrinking defence budgets, and thus should be observed carefully by the United States’ NATO allies.

New Initiatives in Japan’s Security Policy. Since the conservative Liberal–Democratic electoral victory in December 2012, and the establishment of the Shinzo Abe cabinet, Japan has been testing the waters in respect to scrapping some of the limitations on its influence on security and defence policy, imposed after the Second World War. In particular, under Article 9 of its constitution, Japan renounced war and the threat to use military force as a foreign policy tool. In the course of the first overview of the defence guidelines with the U.S. since 1998, a document that effectively lays the foundation for Japan’s security strategy, Abe’s cabinet hinted at the possibility of engaging Japan in collective defence, in effect allowing for the use of force even when Japan itself were not being attacked. The Japanese authorities intend to revise the ten-year national defence programme, adopted in 2010, to strengthen military capabilities. In January, the Abe cabinet approved a fairly limited (2%) but politically significant increase in the military budget, for the first time in a decade. Expenditures will rise to \$49.2 billion, thus still accounting for 1% of Japanese GDP. Additional means have been earmarked to boost the capabilities necessary to keep control over the Senkaku Islands (a new air force detachment will be set up in the vicinity of the archipelago), and to purchase additional early warning aircraft as well as new PAC-3 anti-missile systems, on top of the existing four batteries and the core of the Japanese missile defence potential, constituting Aegis-class destroyers.

The current Japanese administration is cautious about introducing amendments to the constitution. No overt attempts have been made to rewrite the crucial Article 9. However, in late January Abe signalled that he would consider ways to liberalise the procedure of introducing constitutional amendments (Article 96 requires all changes to gain the approval of two-thirds of lawmakers in both houses of parliament, before being submitted to a nationwide referendum), which could in set the stage for bolder steps in the future.

Japan’s Perception of U.S. Commitment. Cooperation with the United States has, so far, served as the cornerstone of Japan’s security policy. U.S. security guarantees for Japan, set forth in the 1960 Treaty on Mutual Cooperation and Security, are underwritten by the presence of the 52,000-strong U.S. military contingent on Japanese territory, currently the second-largest permanent American deployment in the world after Europe. Further, Japan cooperates closely with the U.S. on missile defence: the latest modification of the American BMD programme foresees the deployment of additional radar to Japan, while both countries are already engaged in the joint development of the SM3 Block IIA interceptor. Japan is also one of the international partners in the U.S.-led F-35 Joint

Strike Fighter investment programme, and the prospects for the growth of its share in developing and producing the aircraft are increasing following the recent decision to exempt F-35 components from the arms export ban to countries involved in international conflicts, which could apply, for example, to Israel, and create a broader playing field for the Japanese defence industry.

Nevertheless, recent Japanese initiatives could be driven by mounting doubts over the credibility of the United States' security guarantees. First, there is concern over both growing Chinese military capabilities and the United States' potential reaction should the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku Islands escalate.¹ China continues to increase its defence expenditure at a rate of 10% a year. In 2011, and spent nearly \$130 billion on defence, or two-and-a-half times more than Japan. In the first half of 2012, China deployed its first aircraft carrier, and in April 2013 announced that it would be procuring a second. China boosts the survivability of its nuclear arsenal and prioritises the development of assets necessary to limit the operational leeway of the U.S. and its allies, such as anti-ship missiles and anti-satellite weapon systems. At the same time, the U.S. administration avoids far-reaching steps and declarations on the Senkaku dispute. On the one hand, while in her capacity as the secretary of state, Hillary Clinton recognised that the archipelago is lawfully administered by Japan, thus signalling that the United States would abide by the *casus foederis* clause of the 1960 treaty in the event of Chinese aggression. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the U.S. would react similarly if the crisis escalated as a result of Japanese belligerence.

Secondly, the Japanese authorities and public opinion appear sceptical about U.S. policy towards North Korea. In particular, doubts surround the efficacy of deterrence, both conventional and nuclear (the Obama administration exempted North Korea, along with other nuclear countries shunning their non-proliferation obligations, from the no first use policy in 2010, but it did not stop Pyongyang), and the prospects of political and economic initiatives aimed at reining in Pyongyang's intransigence. Even after social acceptance of nuclear power dipped following the accident in Fukushima, the case for continuing the civilian nuclear programme is being justified by the need to maintain the technical ability of weaponising it—a scenario unlikely to be implemented given the international backlash that would ensue, but nonetheless a testimony to the gravity of concerns about the ability to contain North Korea. Indeed, following the recent North Korean nuclear test and threats to launch missile strikes against targets region-wide, calls are mounting to amend and interpret the Japanese constitution in a manner that would allow for pre-emptive use of force with conventional assets.

Finally, it is unclear how sequestration, i.e. the automatic reduction of defence spending cuts that came into force in March, would affect the operational readiness of the U.S. military and the prospects of key procurement programmes, and whether the cuts would lessen the effect of the so-called pivot to the Asia-Pacific. The sequestration forced a \$59 billion cut in the naval forces' 2014–2018 budget (a 10% cut), which could push back the process of relocating additional forces from the Atlantic basin to the Pacific. In the case of the air force, mandatory austerity measures mean that the number of air patrols will be cut by one-third. Funding for the Marine Corps reflects the plans to boost the presence in Asia-Pacific (bases in Australia, Guam and Japan), but sequestration has put equipment modernisation and acquisition programmes on hold, as, for example, regarding new airlift capabilities. Finally, defence spending cuts are likely to result in delays to the F-35 project. The postponements so far (unrelated to sequestration) have forced some countries to reduce their orders, which will raise the unit cost per fighter.

Conclusions. One unintended consequence of the initiatives of the Abe cabinet, especially if Japan were to change its attitude towards the use of force, could be the rise of tensions in East Asia over lingering fears of Japanese militarism. This would be against U.S. interests, which are focused on mitigating the effects of regional crises and avoiding their escalation. That seemed to be the cause of the United States' request in March, to hold consultations over possible reactions to a military crisis around the Senkaku Islands. The United States wants to ensure that Japan will not act unilaterally, and to exert some influence on the Japanese response to any contingency involving China. Japan strives to secure additional guarantees of U.S. engagement, over and above the provisions of the 1960 treaty and the current military presence, cognisant of the limitations resulting from budgetary pressures facing the Pentagon. The U.S. is likely to take additional steps to reassure Japan, by, for example, holding joint exercises (in September 2012, the manoeuvres covered the defence against naval attack) or rotating extra units (this April, the U.S. boosted its airborne assets in Okinawa), but will not significantly change its stance towards the Senkaku dispute.

More generally, the developments in U.S.–Japanese security cooperation offer useful lessons concerning the fiscal, operational and political limitations to the United States' international engagement, including its commitment to NATO. While operational requirements in the Far East are unlikely to impinge upon U.S. readiness to participate in NATO activities, the rigours of the sequester could. Specifically, the need to economise will dictate the scale of U.S. contribution to the Steadfast Jazz live exercises, to be held later this year, or to various bilateral initiatives, as in the case of cooperation between Polish and U.S. air forces. Furthermore, Japan's case indicates that austerity measures could cast a shadow over an otherwise considerable U.S. military and industrial involvement, thus limiting the ability to react to unfavourable security developments, e.g., via additional deployments. Given the dire budgetary situation, fiscal constraints are likely to feature even more prominently when the U.S. considers the necessary scope of its engagement in the regions where no vital American security interests are at stake. European allies in particular would be well advised to factor in this trend.

¹ J. Szczudlik-Tatar, "Sino-Japanese Relations in Light of the Senkaku Islands Dispute," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 11 (228), 3 February 2011.