

US-Japan Ties: Innovate or enervate in a rebalanced region by Nicole Forrester

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“Japan is back!” A snazzy sound bite, but five months later we’re still waiting to see what that looks like in practice. After this weekend, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will likely have an Upper House majority and the political capital to realize Japan’s potential as a tier-one country.

Postwar Japan has made good international citizenry its *raison d’être*. Whether by design or concordance, it has aligned its interests (almost) seamlessly with those of the United States. It serves the US well to have an effective, well-resourced ally acting as a rules promoter, guardian of the global commons, and partner to likeminded and emerging democracies.

Few would then question the centrality of the US-Japan alliance to US and Japanese interests. It is the bedrock of the two countries’ diplomatic and military cooperation as well as the significant, and growing, economic partnership. But like a ship stuck in the doldrums, it might be in good shape but it’s not going anywhere new fast.

In light of the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region, the strategic import of the alliance is growing. The US strives for deeper engagement, allowing it to benefit from the region’s prosperity while maintaining influence over its evolving security environment.

Japan has a central role to play, but the alliance is not realizing its potential as a pillar of the rebalance. Innovation and diversification remain key. The destabilizing alliance relationship cycle of precipitous progress followed by steady erosion needs to stop. And the current myopic focus of resources from both sides must be, at least partially, reoriented toward nonmilitary challenges.

US-Japan hands insist that attempts at alliance modernization pre-date the “pivot” by 20 years or so, which is true. And the relationship remains in decent shape. However like a garden, relationships need maintenance work every day. Without preparation, planting, fertilizing, watering, harvesting, and pruning, no garden or relationship will bear its best product.

A vibrant, resilient, and diverse Japan-US alliance strengthens each partner as well as the rebalance. Japanese and regional voices reiterate their desire for the US to have an

enduring, visible military presence that provides reassurance and deterrence, helping to maintain regional peace and stability, and the international order it has delivered for the past 70 years. Skepticism toward the sustainability of the rebalance broadly, and high-level military engagement specifically, could be muted by alliance diversification that goes beyond mil-to-mil cooperation.

In a multipolar, globalized environment, nonmilitary issues are equally important to regional prosperity and security. The rebalance strategy – with its economic, diplomatic, and military dimensions – recognizes this reality. Diversification of and innovation in the US-Japan alliance provides a mutually reinforcing mechanism for the rebalance. It could also provide a public relations boon.

Based on the belief that measures beyond mil-to-mil cooperation can be employed to strengthen regional peace, stability, and prosperity, such innovation has been the focus of Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF) Fellows. Launched in 2010, the SPF Fellowship was designed to bring new blood, new ideas, and new energy to a critical partnership that many, especially young Americans and Japanese, increasingly took for granted.

Fellows have been exploring opportunities for expanded cooperation among the US and Japan in fields and functional areas less directly related to traditional security cooperation. They identify areas for new and enhanced collaboration with non-military sectors (including business) on emerging security issues such as space, cyber, and biosecurity, as well as ensuring stable energy supplies through resource development and production projects. Other recommendations look to use military resources in innovative ways, such as building regional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief capacity. [For discussion of these innovative opportunities see “Innovate or enervate: The future of US-Japan alliance collaboration” <http://csis.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-13-no-8>]

Diversification cannot be just about what the alliance does, but how it is done and who partners are. The Asia-Pacific security threats are increasingly transnational, a development that throws into sharp relief the limits on the capacity of bilateral US-ally relationships to counter regional security threats, traditional or otherwise. Effective alliance management demands that the US work with Japan and its other regional allies (and they, with each other) in a networked manner.

For Japan, a networked alliance approach led by innovations in the Japan-US relationship would afford influence in the way the US manages, expands, and utilizes its regional alliances. This could help satisfy Japan’s dual aspirations: movement toward and recognition of a more equal partnership, and opportunities to work even more closely with

US allies and other like-minded democracies throughout the region.

Innovation in functional areas will not only buttress the bilateral Japan-US relationship. Cooperation in areas beyond traditional hard security with new partners in the region could lead to the establishment of new, and strengthening of existing, political, military and institutional ties.

Prime Minister Abe says that Japan cannot allow itself to become self-absorbed with domestic economic concerns and needs to bear more responsibility. Abe must decide how much burden Japan is willing to share. How far is Japan willing to go to innovate and diversify its key relationship to avert the risk of alliance enervation in a rebalanced region? Engagement transformation across the partnership provides one approach.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.