



US-Japan “2+2” statement – breaking new ground?

by Yuki Tatsumi

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On Oct. 3, the United States and Japan held the Security Consultative Committee (SCC) meeting, often referred to as “two-plus-two” because it includes the US secretaries of state and defense and Japan’s foreign and defense ministers, in Tokyo. The Joint Statement issued at the end of the meeting, *Toward a More Robust Alliance and Greater Shared Responsibilities*, described the vision of the US-Japan alliance that is “more balanced and effective.” It included an extensive list of action items in three categories: “bilateral security and defense cooperation” (previously called “roles, missions, and capabilities”), “regional engagement,” and “US force realignment in Japan.” While this Joint Statement is encouraging in that it reaffirms the two countries’ joint commitment to further enhance the resilience of the US-Japan alliance, its ambitious agenda raises a simple question: can Washington and Tokyo muster the political capital necessary to move forward with the action items in the document?

A future vision for the Alliance

The Joint Statement is important for several reasons. First, the document reaffirmed the role of the US-Japan alliance as “the cornerstone of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.” It builds on the work done in previous SCC Joint Statements – *Toward a Deeper and Broader Alliance: Building on 50 Years of Partnership* issued in June 2011 and the Joint Statement adopted in April 2012 – when Japan was led by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). In the Japanese context, then, it is important that this document was adopted after the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) returned to power, demonstrating Japan’s bipartisan commitment to deepening the alliance. The fact that the SCC meeting took place in Tokyo for the first time sends a symbolic yet important signal that the two countries are serious about evolving this alliance into a more equitable partnership.

The Joint Statement explicitly encouraged China to embrace greater openness and transparency in its military capability as well as its defense spending. Framing security concerns vis-à-vis China has always been an area of divergence between Tokyo and Washington: when the allies first laid out common strategic objectives in 2004, the rise of China was one area where Washington and Tokyo had differing views, and the question was resolved only at the end of the consultation. A clear articulation of the two countries’ desire for a greater transparency by China in the military realm suggests Washington’s greater sensitivity to Japanese concerns. Inclusion of US’ explicit support for national security policy reform in Japan – establishment of the

National Security Council and deliberations on the right of collective self-defense, for example – will help sustain the Abe government’s momentum in these areas.

In addition, the Joint Statement paved the way for greater US-Japan defense cooperation in emerging areas of national security. Japan’s commitment to greater involvement of the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) is particularly noteworthy. Restricted by the 1969 Diet resolution that limited Japanese use of space to non-military purposes, Japan’s space policy has been unique in its purely scientific nature. JAXA – or the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) that oversees JAXA’s operations, for that matter – has been extremely reluctant to engage in activities that could be interpreted as “military use of space.” Despite enactment of the Space Basic Law in 2008, which allowed Japan to use space for national security purposes if it benefits international peace and security and Japan’s own national security, that reluctance has been a major obstacle to Japan’s utilization of space exploration to benefit Japan’s national security. JAXA’s use of its assets for national security purposes, if implemented, will be groundbreaking for Japan’s space policy.

The two countries’ commitment to better integrating the bilateral dialogue on defense acquisition into the framework of US-Japan defense cooperation is another step into the right direction. Political circumstances surrounding the US defense budget are increasingly uncertain. Despite the Abe government’s decision to increase defense spending, the margin of the increase is expected to be minimal, given other funding priorities such as universal health care and pension system. A more serious bilateral discussion on how the United States and Japan can pursue a “combined” approach to smart defense spending is long overdue and such a dialogue cannot happen without a bilateral consultation on defense acquisition and a deeper dialogue on each other’s emerging requirements for their militaries.

Finally, reaffirmation of the commitment to follow through on the existing relocation plan for US Marines in Okinawa is extremely important. With the announcement of the Joint Statement, both sides signed a revised agreement on US Marine relocation to Guam in which the Japanese government committed to invest \$3.1 billion in construction of facilities. As the Pentagon enters budget negotiations with Congress over its military construction budget, this explicit commitment from Japan will be helpful in making the argument that construction of the Guam facilities must be funded by the US as well.

Implementation remains a key challenge

The biggest challenges will be in implementation. The two countries have identified 12 areas of consultation for bilateral security and defense cooperation. The similar

consultation scheme on “roles, missions, and capabilities (RMC)” that the two countries agreed upon in 2004 has failed to make much progress. Yet, it is unclear whether either side has spent much time reflecting on why the previous consultation framework did not yield concrete results. As officials from both countries proceed with consultations in the areas identified in the Joint Statement, they must reflect on lessons from previous consultations so that they will not repeat the same mistakes.

Second, it isn't clear about the wisdom of creating a deadline for the revision of US-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation by the end of 2014. Updating the current Guidelines, which was agreed in 1997, is an important and appropriate effort. From a bureaucratic point of view, creating a deadline generates a sense of urgency and an incentive to sustain focus. However, meaningful revision requires Japan to provide more clarity on how it will address the right of collective self-defense, which is extremely politically sensitive both inside and outside Japan. Prime Minister Abe has already indicated that his government will not make a decision on this issue until the spring of 2014 at the earliest. In addition, there are voices within Japan, even among those who support Japan's ability to exercise the right of collective self-defense, against making a premature decision. Should the Abe government postpone its decision beyond the spring of 2014, officials in Tokyo must have the courage to extend the deadline on revising the Guidelines: revision for the sake of “making the deadline” will be counterproductive.

Finally, the two sides should have more honest discussions about the constraints they face in their defense spending. Given competing fiscal priorities that the Japanese government faces beyond Prime Minister Abe's tenure, it is unrealistic to expect Japan to spend more than 1.5 percent of its gross domestic product on national defense. For the United States, after sequestration took effect in March 2013, there has been a growing recognition that past projections of future US defense spending – which essentially plateaus for the next 10 years – may have been too optimistic. While the Pentagon has been able to protect resources to maintain capabilities that are deemed critical for its “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific, the situation could change should the current impasse continue. The two countries would be well advised to have frank exchanges on their respective defense spending and priorities, and whether there is room for a “combined” approach for more efficient defense spending.

Toward a More Robust Alliance and Greater Shared Responsibility laid out an ambitious agenda for the US-Japan alliance. The document builds on previous SCC Joint Statements that have been issued since 2004, demonstrating that the US-Japan alliance continues to evolve to meet new security challenges. However, over the last 20 years the two governments often failed to meet the commitments they made in these documents. The difficult work of “implementation” has only begun for alliance managers in both countries. They should make sure that the latest Joint Statement will indeed serve as the catalyst for deepening the US-Japan alliance, not just more pie in the sky.

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