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JAPAN NEEDS TO TALK ABOUT WHAT IT WILL DO FOR ITSELF

Yukio Okamoto

As the world prepares for the election and inauguration of a new American administration, policy makers in Japan are thinking about ways their country can extend and reinforce the Japan-US strategic relationship. During the past decade, the government of Japan has undertaken a series of steps to progressively upgrade and stabilize the security relationship. These have included an expanded role for the Self Defense Forces in the fight against terrorism; the acquisition of sea and air assets making it possible for the SDF

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to conduct operations at a distance from the Japanese islands; increased SDF participation in multilateral security efforts (such as the Proliferation Security Initiative); and the introduction of the hardware and software necessary for integrated launch-phase and descent-phase ballistic missile defense.

Despite the completion of these major and necessary progressive actions, there has been a degree of sideward and even backward slipping in the security arena over the last few years. In Iraq, the dispatch of Ground Self Defense Forces has come to an end and the Air Self Defense Forces cargo and personnel transport mission is likely to be discontinued. In the Indian Ocean, the opposition party led by Mr. Ichiro Ozawa is trying every tactic to block the continued dispatch of the Maritime Self Defense forces supply ships servicing the international flotilla providing security there.

It would be a mistake for Japan to lapse into complacency regarding the expectations a new US administration may have for the security relationship. The security relationship is anchored, of course, in shared interests and shared values. However, assuming that the relationship will remain unchanged is unrealistic. Establishing a strong working relationship with the new administration will require the demonstration of a firm commitment to a flexible and pro-active stance toward the security challenges facing the two countries. A jolt of new activity, if you will, will be necessary to get the relationship off to a good start.

Many discussions on the future of the security relationship start and end with talk of deepening and/or broadening the security relationship. What comes out of these discussions are lists of good things to do in order to achieve greater integration of US military and SDF activities, or declarations of intentions to expand the legal writ of the SDF through reinterpretations of the Constitution. Many pledges have been made and many real programs have been implemented.

The image of the alliance in Washington, however, has not undergone a fundamental transformation.

Rather than further pledges of integration, I believe that advisors to the new American president would be more impressed with Japan's demonstrating a

greater self-reliance and autonomy in security affairs.

One demonstration of a pro-active stance would be for the government of Japan to make greater efforts in providing security for Japanese nationals living and working overseas. For example, while assigning contingents of Self Defense Forces personnel to guard Japan's embassies and consulates would be constitutional, the government has been unable to do so. In Baghdad, every single embassy is guarded by the armed forces of the represented country except for the Embassy of Japan. The security of Japan's embassy is entrusted to privately-employed Iraqi security guards.

Another example is Afghanistan, where countries sending aid workers and civil service personnel to serve in Provincial Reconstruction Teams also send teams of soldiers and police officers to protect those PRTs. Japanese non-governmental organization workers in Afghanistan, however, operate without any such protection.

It is absurd that brave individuals working for the cause of global security and indirectly the interests and image of all Japanese cannot rely on the Japanese government to dispatch its best-trained security personnel for their protection.

Of late, there has been some material improvement in the ability of the SDF to possibly provide mass evacuation and relief services. The acquisition of *Hyuga*-class escort ships with their capacity for sustained helicopter operations gives the SDF the potential to collaborate in humanitarian relief and rescue missions for civilians under threat.


Japan is an archipelago, a maritime nation by definition. Japan's prosperity and security are entirely dependent upon the ability of ships to move freely over the seas. If Japan wants to demonstrate a pro-active stance toward its security it should craft a permanent, national commitment, enshrined in law, to JMSDF participation in security operations guarding safe passage of ships on the open ocean. It is a national embarrassment that Japan has not been able to maintain an uninterrupted JMSDF presence in the Indian Ocean in support of Operation Enduring Freedom's naval contingent. The strong opposition of the Democratic Party of Japan to the dispatch has wounded Japan's standing. At a

time when the leaders of the world's most notorious terror organizations remain at large and Somali pirates have seized dozens of ships, including four Japanese-registered vessels, in the waters about the Horn of Africa, it is deplorable that, pushed by the DPJ, the government of Japan is on the brink, once again, of withdrawing the MSDF from the Indian Ocean.

The government of Japan should publicly reaffirm also that it has not forgotten the broad lesson of September 11: that under the guise of pious devotion to Islam, desperate and merciless networks of intolerant, international criminals are engaged in a private war against contemporary life.

Such a verbal commitment is no substitute for the dispatch of actual forces, of course. However an announcement of a willingness to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the allies in the fight against Al Qaeda and other terrorists will ready the public mind for more advanced legislation.

The US public will be looking for indications from US allies of an understanding that the fight against Al Qaeda continues, and that all US allies understand that they have a stake in the fight. Japan, due to its small footprint in terms of actual forces in the field, has an incentive and, I would argue, the duty to vocally and visibly present itself as an unshakable partner in the fight against the terror networks.

Japan has so far escaped a direct attack on its citizens on its own soil. We have only been lucky. Taking a stand against terrorism is in the national interest. Not showing support for the United States in the fight could brand Japan with a reputation of being an unresponsive and unwilling ally – a reputation that would pose a threat to Japan's hopes for long-term security and peace. 

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