

A 21st century vision for the alliance

By Yoichi Funabashi

Dr. Yoichi Funabashi (ja6868@sepia.ocn.ne.jp) is Editor-in-Chief at the Asahi Shimbun in Tokyo, Japan.

To mark the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Japan-US Security Treaty, the two governments have declared their intention to “deepen” the alliance by creating a new vision for it. However, Japan-US relations are experiencing a rocky patch, mainly due to Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio’s decision to re-examine a 2006 agreement on the relocation of the US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa Prefecture.

Incorporating the base issue within the process of constructing a new vision for the alliance will be crucial. The question now is how to go about creating that new vision.

The most important issue will be stabilizing the relationship with China as it continues its rapid growth on the global economic and political fronts. Although Beijing is not a threat right now, there is no guarantee that will remain so in the future. China’s peaceful rise is due mainly to the cautious perseverance of that nation’s ruling class.

However, as China expands, both economically and militarily, that perseverance may weaken.

In some quarters of Europe and the United States, there are already signs of discomfort and concern about China’s “triumphalism” in the areas of economy and finance, human rights, and global warming. In dealing with Beijing, Harvard professor Joseph Nye has said the United States should try “to integrate China into the international system,” but also “to hedge against the danger that a future and stronger China might turn aggressive.” For that purpose, a functioning Japan-US alliance will be vital. The alliance will only be credible if it serves as a deterrent force during times of peace, while positioned to deal with any military emergencies that may arise. The growing strength of the Chinese navy and the projection of its military might over the Asia-Pacific region could become factors in rising tensions.

Japan and the United States should consider constructing a multilateral structure for maritime stability in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. That would require consultations with Asian neighbors, including China. A starting point would be cooperation among Japan, the United States, Australia, China, Indonesia, and Malaysia in handling the threat of piracy in the South China Sea.

In redefining the Japan-US alliance for the challenges posed by this century, the pact needs to evolve from being “against” something to one that is “for” something. Among the goals that should be sought are securing a stable Japan-China relationship, encouraging policy dialogue among Japan, the

United States, and China, and constructing “maritime peace” centered on those same three nations. Only through such an evolution of the Japan-US alliance can solid stability emerge in China and Asia.

There is also a need to redefine how the alliance is managed. In particular, thought should be given to three principles: the principle of reciprocity; the principle of complementarity; and the principle of collaboration.

The principle of reciprocity means a “common obligation” to deal with “common threats and issues.” What will be important is that the responsibility and burden on both nations are about the same. Until now, the fundamental pillars of the Japan-US alliance was that the US is obliged to defend Japan, while Japan is obliged to provide bases for the US military.

This apparent lack of managing reciprocity has remained the cause of an inherent tension in the alliance. Some have seen this as unfair, and have accused Japan of “free riding.” However, no ally of the US can have a completely reciprocal relationship with the country, due to the lopsidedness of the US-based alliance system. No other ally, including NATO, can match the US military’s roles, missions, or capacity.

Moreover, Japan’s constitutional constraints to “renounce... the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes” (Article 9, Japanese Constitution) and the structure of the Japan-US alliance within the framework of the Constitution has gradually stabilized the Asia-Pacific region. If not ideal, the current structure has worked reasonably well, and this framework can be maintained in the future as long as the excessive burden on Okinawa Prefecture is reduced.

The principle of complementarity means bringing together the strengths of each nation so that the maximum overall effect can be realized. Japan’s strength is civilian power, while the might of the United States lies in its military prowess. Areas in which Japan can carry weight include humanitarian and disaster relief assistance; peace-building and peacekeeping; economic development for nation-building; nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament; a departure from petroleum dependence; and global environment protection with an eye toward creating a low-carbon society.

Of course, a principle of complementarity does not mean an absolute division of labor. There will be no change to the military alliance between the two nations. What will be important in this regard is to maintain and develop the foundations of Japan’s civilian power; in other words, its economic and technological prowess and its international competitiveness.

The principle of collaboration comes down to making absolutely certain what joint duties and operations are needed

to support the alliance. This will require expanding the foundation of human resources contributing to the alliance. For that purpose, it will be necessary to consider a sharing of military intelligence, joint flight training exercises, and joint operations of bases.

The Japan-US alliance was constructed on a foundation of “trust and reconciliation” after the victor and loser of a war promised to never again fight each other. The fact that two nations with different languages and cultures have been able to deepen the relationship of trust to the extent that they have can only be considered a miracle of modern history.

Over the half-century of the alliance, there have been crises and drift. The biggest crisis was the public movement in 1960 against revision of the Japan-US Security Treaty. George Packard, president of the United States-Japan Foundation, was in Japan around the time of the protests. He later served as special assistant to US Ambassador Edwin Reischauer and was a political science professor at Johns Hopkins University.

In his classic work, “Protest in Tokyo,” published in 1966, Packard analyzed the cause of those often violent protests. He asked, “Why was Japan’s worst postwar political crisis so intimately involved with the US alliance?” In another passage, he noted, “there was a notable lack of the accompanying view ... that the treaty contributed to the strength of the free world.”

While Packard attributed such developments to the absence of a two-party system and the immature nature of democracy in Japan, including a dysfunctional principle of majority rule, he gave as the most important factor “nationalism.” He wrote that nationalism was manifested by “a desire to strike back at the source of the postwar intellectual environment – at concepts they could neither live with nor live without.” He also noted the existence in Japan of “the advocacy of closer ties with Asian people, and the self-glorifying, morally superior claim that they were the only true defenders of peace by virtue of being the only victims of the atomic bomb.”

The strong emotions of seeking to move away from a dependence on the US and create a moral solidarity with Asia appears to lie like embers in the hearts of the leaders of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan as well as among the public. But national security policy should not be swayed by emotions.

The essence of national security policymaking is to skillfully suppress nationalistic passions and to conduct rational and strategic policy discussions based on what is in the national interest. A hidden effect of the alliance is its ability to function to restrain the emergence of nationalism in either of the two nations.

The Obama administration has unveiled a national security plan that would take a multilateral approach to protect the “global commons.” The Japan-US alliance is required to cope with the increasing “hybrid” security threat and contain it by making integrated use of diplomacy, development, and defense, along with intelligence and law enforcement. There are some within the Pentagon who are considering the possibility of establishing a Pacific command to provide

humanitarian and disaster relief assistance. Hatoyama’s proposal for a “boat of fraternity” to provide support in humanitarian and disaster relief efforts resonates with the Obama administration’s proposal for a multilateral medical assistance structure.

Now is the time for the government to clear a new frontier in the Japan-US alliance that the DPJ administration can explore and implement and that is unique from anything the Liberal Democratic Party has created.

The Cold War’s legacy has meant that Japan has failed to come up with a bipartisan consensus on national security issues, particularly the U.S.-Japan alliance. It is about time to overcome this. If the DPJ and LDP can achieve a bipartisan agreement on Japan-US security policy, that would be historically significant coming in this 50th anniversary year.