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Featured Analysis

China as a Catalyst for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation

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Japan's Prime Minister warned global leaders at this year's [World Economic Forum](#) that China's military expansion and use of "force and coercion" threaten economic growth in Asia and around the globe. He did not explicitly name China, but according to Japanese officials cited in [news reports](#), his speech addressed a perceived threat from the Chinese. Prime Minister Abe called for restraint of "unchecked" military expansion in Asia, implying that there may not be a sufficient counterbalance to China's claims in the South and East China Seas. The Prime Minister's calls for restraint were intended primarily for American leaders, because the United States is the only country with a military presence in the region large enough to deter China, and it is bound to defend Japan by Article 5 of the [Japan-U.S. Security Treaty](#). The Prime Minister's concerns about the security environment surrounding Japan have been outlined in Japan's recently updated [Guidelines for National Defense](#), which seek to address shifts in the regional balance of power due to China's development and the "relative change in U.S. influence."^[1]

Strengthening Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation

China is challenging a territorial status quo in the Asia-Pacific that was established in the 1951 [San Francisco Peace Treaty](#), which legally defines Japan's postwar territory. Japan's leaders are concerned about the capability of the Japan-U.S. alliance to protect Japan's territory against Chinese incursions, and Tokyo is eager to work with Washington to address the challenges by revising the [Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation](#) by the end of 2014. The Guidelines enhance Japan-U.S. cooperation in the case of an armed attack on Japan and in "situations in areas surrounding Japan that will have an important influence on Japan's peace and security." According to Tetsuo Kotani, a Fellow at the [Japan Institute of International Affairs](#), a prominent Japanese think tank, Japan is seeking revisions to the Guidelines to better address potential "gray zone" scenarios which represent the majority of maritime conflicts with China thus far as well as anticipated future conflicts.

Mr. Kotani is not leaving the revision of the Guidelines to chance. He and other Japanese scholars have strategically descended upon Washington, D.C. think tanks at the start of the new year to conduct research and analysis on alliance issues. Their goal is to influence policy makers in Japan and the U.S. in order to shape the revision of the Guidelines in ways that support the defense of Japan. Underlying these efforts are Japanese concerns that the current guidelines do not adequately provide for the defense of Japan against China, and Japan harbors larger concerns about U.S. commitment to its rebalance policy.

Challenges to the Japan-U.S. Security Alliance

Mr. Kotani offers his views on some of the underlying challenges currently facing the Japan-U.S. security alliance:

- Prime Minister Abe and President Obama have yet to establish adequate personal trust, and although

the U.S. and Japan have agreed to revise the defense guidelines, many Japanese remain skeptical that there is enough political will at the leadership level to achieve trust.

- There is a gap in understanding between Tokyo and Washington; the Japanese still do not know what AirSea Battle means, and many Japanese feel that Americans do not fully understand Japan's perspective when it comes to discussions of Japan's southwestern islands.
- The Obama administration puts too much emphasis on engagement with China rather than hedging or deterrence.
- National Security Advisor Susan Rice's November 2013 [speech at Georgetown University](#) sent the wrong message to China and failed to reassure Japanese leaders because it sought merely to manage U.S. competition and cooperation with China.
- The rebalance needs to be backed up by an appropriate military strategy to address China's anti-access/area-denial threats.

Mr. Kotani hopes to fill the gaps in understanding between Tokyo and Washington by sharing his research, analysis and recommendations with policy makers in both countries. After concluding his visit to Washington, one of his primary goals for this year will be to act as a public diplomat to try to influence international public opinion by visiting as many countries as possible to explain what is really going on in the South and East China Seas. He will tell his audience that this is not about small islands or about resources, nor is this about nationalism. This is about the future of Asia. He will argue that this is about China challenging the territorial status quo based on the San Francisco Peace Treaty, and he will caution that if we allow China to challenge the status quo, it will destroy the regional order. He says there are skeptics who believe it is not possible to stand up to China, but he feels it is important for Japan to stand firm without rejecting dialogue.

When asked if there are regional concerns about Japan's assertiveness in the security realm, he said that China and South Korea can generally be very difficult to deal with, but Prime Minister Abe is keeping the door open for dialogue and that the only thing Japan can do is wait for a better political atmosphere. Because Japan, South Korea and China are all operating under relatively new leadership, it could be some time before the arrival of an improved political climate.

Japanese Concern over U.S. Rebalance Commitment

While waiting for an improved political atmosphere and keeping the door to dialogue open, Japan will attempt to persuade the international public and policy makers alike that the Japan-U.S. security alliance must be strengthened. Japan's efforts are motivated by concerns about diminished American influence resulting from a lack of political will or financial commitment or both. Japanese concerns are not baseless. According to a [2012 Center for Strategic and International Studies \(CSIS\) independent assessment of U.S. Force Posture in the Asia-Pacific](#), U.S. fiscal constraints may diminish DoD "rebalance" capabilities in the Asia-Pacific. Mr. Kotani warns that in March 2014, the U.S. will be unable to send a large transport or hospital ship to participate in the annual Pacific Partnership mission in the Asia-Pacific due to budget constraints. The Partnership is a humanitarian and civic assistance mission that strengthens alliances and improves security cooperation among partner nations while delivering humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. For the first time, Japan will provide the flagship and the U.S. will act as the commanding element on the Japanese ship. As this year's mission visits Tonga, Vanuatu, Timor-Leste, and the Federated States of Micronesia, a Japanese flagship will be highly visible, and this could be interpreted as a shift in power projection in which Japan plays a more active role in the maritime domain where and when the U.S. is unwilling or unable to do so. The inability of the U.S. to participate at the same level as in years past may send signals of diminished capacity and potential vulnerability to the Asia-Pacific region, and this concerns Japan because it may embolden China; it also causes Japan to question U.S. ability to finance its rebalance efforts and protect its Japanese treaty ally.

A New Japan-U.S. Approach Needed With China: Carrot and Stick

Updating the U.S.-Japan security alliance to better address the changing security climate in the Asia-Pacific will benefit both countries, but Japan and the U.S. can support the alliance by engaging China in ways that send clear, coordinated signals in response to China's territorial claims. A carrot-and-stick approach with clear enticements and admonitions could allow Japan and the U.S. to engage China bilaterally and multilaterally while showing China that there are consequences for actions that violate international rule of law and freedom of navigation in and above the South and East China Seas. For example, the Pacific Partnership is a potential carrot that Japan and the U.S. could use to positively reinforce Chinese behavior that promotes peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. Extending an invitation for a Chinese hospital ship to join the mission could be used to reward favorable behavior.

China's establishment of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in November 2013 represented a failed opportunity for Japan and the U.S. to coordinate and wield bigger sticks. Japan's lower house unanimously [passed a resolution](#) condemning China's ADIZ, and Japan sent aircraft into the zone in defiance. American leaders also voiced disapproval but took no discernible action beyond flying B-52 bombers through the ADIZ to reject China's claim. The U.S. seeks peace and stability in the region and is bound by the [Japan-U.S. Security Treaty](#) to protect Japan—China's ADIZ threatened both—so it is surprising that Vice President Biden did not use a bigger stick to respond to China. The Vice President departed for Tokyo and then continued on to Beijing as previously scheduled to meet with Chinese President Xi, to whom he expressed

Washington's concern over the ADIZ. The two leaders spoke privately, but neither leader discussed the ADIZ in front of journalists. According to Lieutenant General Wallace "Chip" Gregson, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, such a conciliatory gesture by the U.S. was diplomatic but failed to convey to China that there are consequences for its actions. General Gregson suggests that cancellation of the Vice President's stop in Beijing would have more clearly signaled to the Chinese that actions like the ADIZ which threaten the security of Japan and the U.S. have real-world consequences. There are those who fear upsetting China, but it is important to keep in mind that Beijing has employed similar tactics when it halted military exchanges to protest U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.[2] More active use of coordinated carrots and sticks by Japan and the U.S. against China may be a useful complement to strengthened defense cooperation between the two allies.

The U.S. appears to be pursuing a strategy in the Asia-Pacific that seeks to avoid getting the United States pulled into regional maritime skirmishes between Japan and China. The reluctance is understandable given the propensity for small skirmishes to escalate into something which may require a larger U.S. commitment. However, many Japanese are questioning the value and purpose of a security alliance with the United States if it is unwilling or unable to protect Japan against China. Using this premise, it is no wonder that Prime Minister Abe has warned the global community of unchecked Chinese military expansion, and it is no wonder that there are concerted efforts by Japanese academics to educate and shape security policy to better defend Japan. As Japan and the U.S. prepare to revise the Defense Cooperation Guidelines, it will be important for policy makers on both sides to recognize the evolving threat to stability in the Asia-Pacific and strengthen the alliance accordingly.

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[1] "National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2014 and Beyond," Office of the Japanese Prime Minister, December 17, 2013, 1.

[2] "China Suspends Military Visits with U.S. over Planned Arms Sales to Taiwan," Xinhua, January 30, 2010, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/xw/t655234.htm>.