

Wing Walking: The US–Japan Alliance¹

By Richard J. Samuels

The US-Japan alliance has been at the center of stability in East Asia in the post-World War II era.

But that alliance must now be open to change, if Washington and Tokyo are to enable new, emerging power balances in the region to usher in a new era of security for the region, writes noted US political scientist Richard J. Samuels.

THE FOUR-SIDED BALANCE of power in East Asia has been relatively stable for more than half a century, despite significant shifts in the relative clout of three sides of the equation — China, Russia, and Japan.² It is hard to avoid crediting the military presence of the fourth power, the United States, for the fact that the conflicts that have occurred — notwithstanding the painful experiences of Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia — were limited in number and scope, and that after the Korean War none directly involved the region’s most populous states — Japan, China, Russia and Indonesia.

Today, serious thinkers know that this balance will shift and are suggesting that it is time to reconceive the US strategic posture.³ Their analysis begins with the fact that the US oversupplies its own security. Washington, after all, controls what Barry Posen calls “the global commons” — the entire world’s sea, air and outer space.⁴ They note, though, that it does so at a significant and growing cost. Imperial overstretch dilutes US power, erodes US national will, makes America the primary target of the world’s discontented and stimulates anti-American positioning. Their solution is for Washington to draw down and reduce its commitments abroad.

These are not old-school isolationists. The advocates of restraint believe that Washington should reduce its costs and threats by making sure that local actors look after their own interests and regions, but argue that the US should maintain the capability to engage in balance-of-power politics if necessary. Specifically, this means US disengagement from the military command structure of the

1 Portions of this argument first appeared in Richard J. Samuels, "The Future of the Japan-US Alliance", a paper prepared for the Waseda University Organization for Japan-US Studies, Tokyo, June 2008. It also benefits from discussions at the conference on "US-Japan Relations and a Changing Asia," organized by the MIT Center for International Studies, 29 February – 1 March 2008 and from subsequent conversations with my colleagues, Taylor Fravel and Barry Posen.

2 Robyn Lim, *The Geopolitics of East Asia* (London: Routledge, 2003).

3 Barry R. Posen, "The Case for Restraint," *The American Interest*, 3:2 (November-December 2007). Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey Sapolsky, "Come Home America," *International Security* 21(4): 5-48 (1997). This account of the restraint option is from Professor Posen's keynote address at the Endicott House meeting cited above.

4 Posen, Barry, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of US Hegemony,"

International Security, Volume 28, Number 1, Summer 2003, 5-46.

5 For a Japanese view of the shifting regional balance of power, see "New Security Strategy of Japan: Multilayered and Cooperative Security Strategy," Report of the Tokyo Foundation, 8 October 2008.

6 See John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an end to US military subsidies to Israel and ending the Japan-US alliance. This prescription is attractive as a general alternative to America's muscular unilateralism of the past eight years and is very much worth discussing. Given that its citizens are safe without overextending US power, why should Washington *not* pursue the restraint option? After all, the Bush experiments proved that US power is not benign and that unipolarity invites negative reaction. Wouldn't both the US and the world be better off if Washington renounced its self-appointed role of "global cop"? Couldn't the US reduce its current \$700 billion defense budget and remain safe? There is no doubt, after all, that the costs of empire cannot be sustained indefinitely. In the cases of East Asia and Europe, why shouldn't the great — and rich — powers find their own balance?

These are good questions, each long overdue for a close examination that may well generate different answers for different regions. Certainly, US planners must contemplate a new strategic order in the region. Japanese strategists are already doing so.⁵ However, there are several reasons why "restraint" may not be the best near-term option for the US in East Asia. First, although US security guarantees undoubtedly encourage "reckless driving" by indemnifying the private interests of states, this has not been the case in Asia. Here, South Korea and Japan were prime candidates to act upon such a moral hazard, but America's principal allies focused instead on becoming rich. Even Taiwan, where reckless driving was most feared under independence-minded President

Chen Shui-bian, kept within bounds. The US presence (and its open market) provided an indivisible public good — stability in the world's fastest growing region that undergirded widespread and sustained global prosperity. Consumers and producers in every state were significantly better off, not least those in the US.

Second, balancing is rarely smooth and often is extremely costly in blood and lucre — especially for a distant great power forced by circumstance to return to the theater. It is not self-evident why states faced with the withdrawal of the US would resolve themselves into a similarly stable and mutually enriching East Asian system, rather than intensifying security dilemmas and increasing hedging — each of which generates uncertainty. The resultant instability would be neither short in duration nor cheap to the US.

Third, it is not clear that the end of Japan's cheap ride on US security guarantees would be the beginning of shared burdens, common cause, ameliorated risks or significantly reduced costs to the US. The end of the alliance, or even the threat of its demise, would invite Japan to choose between balancing China and accommodating it. If Tokyo opts for the former, Washington will have stimulated exactly the great power dynamics most likely to destabilize the region. If it selects the latter, the US will have helped create the regional hegemon that structural realists most fear.⁶ Without the US military as a "pacifier," one of two things will happen. Either Japan will become a great (and nuclear armed) power — perforce spelling a decline in US influence there — or else China and Japan will find common

7 For a recent analysis of Japan's nuclear options, see Llewelyn Hughes. "Why Japan Will Not Go Nuclear (Yet): International and Domestic Constraints on the Nuclearization of Japan," *International Security*, Volume 31, Number 4, Spring 2007, 67-96. The extent to which Japanese strategy was ever "anti-militarist" was undercut sharply by recently declassified documents revealing how Prime Minister Sato Eisaku urged Defense Secretary Robert MacNamara in 1965 to use nuclear weapons on China in the event of an attack by Beijing on Japan. *International Herald Tribune*, 22 December 2008.

cause in balancing jointly US power on the *global* stage.⁷ Neither is an attractive alternative to the status quo. A national debate about Japan's security posture, occasioned by what many Japanese openly refer to as America's "relative decline," is already underway.⁸

Fourth, there are as yet no viable multilateral institutions that might plausibly ameliorate a regional arms race or that might provide the transparency needed for Washington to be confident that restraint would be less costly than the status quo. As I shall explore below, the stability of the region's security architecture depends on the robust bilateral hub and spokes provided by the US. While a change in this architecture will surely come, US interests are best served in the near-term if Washington remains a player in the region, with a seat at the head of the table where the new arrangements are negotiated.⁹

For these several reasons, then, the bilateral security alliance does not seem more costly than its likely alternatives. To have more confidence in this claim, one would have to review US and Japanese interests in greater detail than is possible here. Instead, let me stipulate that the shared goals of preserving stability, openness and security in Northeast Asia have not changed. The US and Japan are still stronger together than apart. My argument here is straightforward. As in the case of the Depression Era "wing-walkers" in the United States who entertained crowds high above state fairs with their airborne acrobatics, in matters of national security it is dangerous to let go with one hand before having a secure grasp with the other. Not only should Washington not let go of the alliance until it has a firm hold on a new security architecture, it should strengthen the alliance as a means toward that end. The US needs to be engaged in the region if a multi-polar balance of power in East Asia is to be established that does not increase the risks of miscalculation and war.

8 For examples, see Tanaka Hitoshi, 2009. *Gaiko no Chikara* (The Power of Diplomacy). Tokyo: Nikkei, p. ii and "New Security Strategy of Japan: Multilayered and Cooperative Security Strategy," 2008, op.cit. Also see Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) for a snapshot of the contemporary security discourse in Japan.

9 This is what Secretary of State Hillary Clinton seemed to have in mind in her 13 February 2009 speech to the Asia Society in New York when she declared that "the US is committed to maintaining our historic security alliances in Asia and building on those relationships to counter complex global threats." The full text of her remarks are at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/02/117333.htm>

The first step toward ensuring that engagement is to strengthen the US-Japan alliance.

This is no small task, for while Tokyo and Washington retain many common interests, as James Schoff and I recently have argued, it is no secret that cracks have emerged that require attention by the administration of Barack Obama and its counterpart in Tokyo.¹⁰ There has been plenty of open discussion in Tokyo and Washington about "abandonment," "opting out," "accommodation to China's rise," "erosion of the East Asian balance of power," "failure of extended deterrence," the "failure of the non-proliferation regime," "weak reassurance" and other uncoded indications of an enfeebled alliance. Indeed, despite the robustness of the relationship during the immediate post-9/11 period, it became disturbingly easy toward the end of the George W. Bush administration to imagine the further hollowing out of the Japan-US alliance. A catastrophic US failure in Iraq, a US foreign policy distracted by a misadventure in Iran, a failed US response in East Asia to a Chinese challenge in Taiwan and/or a Japanese failure to support US forces in a Taiwan contingency — each would stimulate fundamental reconsideration of US alliances in East Asia. So would US acceptance of further nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula. In short, if either Japan or the US fails to meet or enhance its commitment to the other, a new regional security architecture not of Washington's (or Tokyo's) choosing will surely result.

It therefore makes sense for Washington and Tokyo to recalibrate how alliance burdens are shared and decisions are made, lest one or both lose interest. Rather than signal disinterest by exercising restraint, Washington ought to continue to exhort greater Japanese contributions to global order, be it in maritime security, helping failed states or bolstering UN peacekeeping missions. In

10 "An Alliance in Need of Attention," *International Herald Tribune*, 23 January 2008.

11 See her 13 February speech to the Asia Society, *op.cit.*

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return, Washington should cede proportionate decision-making power within the alliance, be prepared for Japan to decline entanglement in certain conflicts and welcome Japan as a full security partner. Getting this balance right would reduce Japanese incentives to pursue a so-called "cheap ride," especially if the reinforced alliance is made transparent to China and if the "roles and missions" include non-military activities. This sensibility seemed to undergird Secretary Hillary Clinton's first official statements about the alliance. Prior to her first official visit to the region in February 2009, she declared that the US-Japan alliance "must remain unshakeable," but added that the Obama administration expects and will encourage Japan to step up other forms of contributions to global security.¹¹

This recalibration must be crafted with care. The alliance will not help maintain regional stability if it remains unequal or if it appears to be directed against China. In the case of the former, it is precisely this inequality that Japan uses as a hedge against Chinese military power; and hedges are insurance policies that generate moral hazard and, thereby, suspicion. In the case of the latter—even if it is only a matter of Chinese perceptions—it is important that much of Japan's contributions are non-military. This is why justifications of the alliance based on shared values, rather than shared interests, can be self-defeating. It is in both partners' interests to reassure China that its responsible rise and constructive role will be met with restraint and cooperation. One way to do this might be to focus on strengthening Japanese contributions far "out of area." A stronger, more equal alliance designed with a concern for Chinese perceptions and ambitions could both ameliorate incentives for reckless driving and reduce the grip of regional security dilemmas.

Getting the alliance right is more urgent than it may seem. With China rising and new nuclear

12 For example, see Yukio Satoh, “Reinforcing American Extended Deterrence for Japan: An Essential Step for Nuclear Disarmament,” *AJISS Commentary*, Tokyo: The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies, 3 February 2009. and James L. Schoff, “Does the Nonproliferation Tail Wag the Deterrence Dog?” *PacNet Newsletter*, Number 9, February 2009.

13 J. Patrick Boyd and Richard J. Samuels, “Prosperity’s Children: Generational Change and Japan’s Future Leadership,” *Asia Policy*, Number 6 (July 2008), 15-51.

14 The “New Security Strategy of Japan: Multilayered and Cooperative Security Strategy,” 2008, op. cit., 23, anticipates this by calling for an “inclusive” multilateralism in the region.

15 Richard J. Samuels, “‘New Fighting Power!’: Japan’s Growing Maritime Capabilities and East Asian Security” *International Security* Vol. 32, No. 3 Winter 2007/2008, 84-112.

facts on North Korean ground, some in Tokyo worry that the US nuclear umbrella might be developing holes.¹² Japan is increasingly concerned about being bullied by a stronger China or blackmailed by North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, while the US is focused on nuclear proliferation and terrorist attacks on American territory. Much to Tokyo’s chagrin, Washington ceded leadership in multilateral talks about North Korea to Beijing, and in 2008 Washington took North Korea off the list of state-sponsors of terrorism, tacitly accepting North Korean nukes.

Meanwhile, much to Washington’s dismay, the long-negotiated “road map” for transforming the unequal US-Japan alliance into a more jointly operational security partnership has run into political roadblocks in Japan. With an election looming — and with the increasingly unpopular Liberal Democratic Party likely to lose power or even disappear altogether — it seems that Tokyo has allowed domestic interests to tie its diplomacy in knots. Just when Washington expected Tokyo to be ready to play a larger security role, Japan began backpedaling: Tokyo spent months deliberating while Somali pirates seized Japanese and others’ ships with valuable cargoes. It waited until more than 20 other nations, including China, dispatched naval vessels to the Gulf of Aden to protect the sea-lanes before deciding that it too could contribute to the commonweal. The Japanese overseas aid program, once the largest in the world, has been cut back by 40 percent. It is remarkable that after decades of cheap talk about how Tokyo is ready to provide global public goods, only 38 Japanese troops participate in just three UN peacekeeping operations today, compared to more than 2,000 Chinese soldiers in 11 peacekeeping operations. Its defense budget continues to decline (it is now less than 0.9% of GDP), host nation support for

US forces was temporarily suspended in 2008, and the Japanese government has abandoned its efforts to reinterpret the constitution to allow its military to protect allied forces under fire outside of Japanese territory. Japan today — even before the inevitable accession of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to power and despite paying more than \$6 billion for the relocation of US marines from Okinawa to Guam — is less able and less willing to support the US than it was three years ago. Its electoral rhetoric notwithstanding, we should expect the DPJ to chart a status quo, pro-alliance course; but there is always room for instability when national leadership shifts.¹³ So, there is much work to be done if the alliance is to be enhanced — or even if the status quo is to be maintained — as a way forward toward a stable reduction in the US military footprint in Northeast Asia.

There are several new security arrangements that an enhanced alliance could make possible without sacrificing US or Japanese interests. The most attractive would involve the formation of a regional security community modeled on the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE)¹⁴ In Asia, the Six Party Talks and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) are often spoken of as proto-versions of an Asian OSCE. Such a body may emerge one day and that would allow the US to draw down its presence in the region. But the ARF and the Six Party Talks have had only limited success and its members share no security vision. Nor, given the difficulty Taiwan presents, is there a shared view on the common borders that would be part of the security community.

Another, albeit less comprehensive, organizational form exists. The most impressive current example is the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum (NPCGF). Under its banner — and, apparently, under the radar of most of the media — the coast

guards of China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and the US are cooperating actively and effectively to enhance regional maritime security.¹⁵ While the NPCGF is widely regarded as successful — and while it is unique in the fact that it engages region-wide cooperation among uniformed, armed officers — its mission is limited to non-military activities; the same obstacles to security cooperation that apply to the ARF and the Six Party Talks apply equally to the NPCGF.

A third, far less attractive, alternative would be a NATO-like multilateral balancing alliance. The creation of such a North East Asia Treaty Organization would require the rise of a China that looks far more threatening to far more regional actors than is the case today. Even though South Korea has repositioned itself closer to the US than it had in the early part of this decade, Seoul still has little interest in positioning itself to balance, much less to contain, its enormous Chinese neighbor. Moscow is pursuing joint exercises with Beijing, and Japan is actively repositioning itself vis-à-vis China after the very difficult years of the Koizumi premiership. Should a NATO clone become attractive, it will signal very difficult times ahead.

Given this, and given the persistent multiple benefits of the current international environment in East Asia for both Washington and Tokyo, the better choice is continued enhanced bilateralism — albeit one in which Japan acknowledges, and moves convincingly to reduce, its cheap ride and in which the US moves convincingly to reduce its imperiousness and constrain its unilateral instincts. Tokyo needs to convince Washington that it remains invested in the US presence and Washington needs to convince Tokyo that it can live with full Japanese sovereignty. Both together need to convince China that they are prepared to accept, or at least to discuss, its legitimate security concerns. Should this all fail, then the restraint option will look attractive to an even larger swath of policy elites in both countries.

I have argued here that the near- and mid-term health of the bilateral US-Japan alliance is, ironically, the key to the sort of long-term transformation toward multilateralism that restraint

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proponents — and all of us — should welcome. As a precondition, the Obama administration needs to sort through four issues. First, it must determine how much of a forward presence the US needs in order to maintain stability in East Asia. Less may be better than more, but too little could be destabilizing. The “force transformation” initiated during the Bush administration should be continued. The move of the Third Marine Expeditionary Force from Okinawa to Guam is a measured step in this direction. Second, Washington must consider how credibly to threaten the exercise of restraint so that Tokyo reverses its long-standing lassitude on matters of regional and global security and figures out how to do more in other areas as well. Next, strategic planners will need to understand that the status quo — Japan’s cheap ride, US overextension and Chinese mistrust — cannot be allowed to persist unaddressed. And, finally, in the event that alliance managers fail to transform the relationship in time, they must draw a clear bead on its first derivative. For, by then, it will be too late for “restraint” on Washington’s terms.

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