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How Will the New U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines Affect Regional Security?

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The new Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation were unveiled on April 27 in New York, coinciding with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Washington, D.C. The visit has been judged a major coup by many in the United States and a major success for the dynamic Japanese leader. If Abe's goal was merely to bring the two Pacific powers into greater political alignment, then the trip was a remarkable success. The fact that alliance managers on both sides had worked hard to bring the two powers into greater military and security alignment added to that success. Both the prime minister's U.S. visit and the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines (herein called "the guidelines") are a reaction to growing insecurity in the Asia-Pacific region and an attempt to reinvigorate and recalibrate the alliance's functions. What many regional states will now be wondering is what impact the new guidelines will have on regional security.

Complementing and informing the 1960 U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, the 2015 Defense Guidelines act as a policy framework, a way for the two militaries to know what is and isn't permissible within the scope of the alliance, and to guide the evolution of that cooperation. This iteration—replacing the 1997 guidelines—is being called "historic" by many, though others have been more cautious, saying that while significant, the guidelines do too little to restore the growing imbalance of power in the region. Perhaps predictably, China—itsself seen by many states in a 2014 Pew Poll as a source for the growing instability—blasted the guidelines as a "relic from the Cold War." The irony was lost on few in the region, given the frenzy of island reclamation and militarization that Beijing has carried out over the past month in its effort to project power over sea-lanes vital to the region.

Why Now?

In answer to the question posed by many "why now," alliance managers have answered that the security environment of the region has changed drastically from the late 1990s, when the guidelines were last written. Then, the guidelines emphasized Japan's growing willingness to act regionally and burden share in areas like peacekeeping operations, maritime security, and essentially to more-than-defense-of-Japan duties. These changes seemed appropriate to a time when failed states and civil wars were the biggest challenges to the international community, and when the United States was searching for active partners. However, the changes made by the 2015 Guidelines are even more remarkable, with the alliance broadening its remit—geographically and to third-party countries—and deepening its functions—installing a new whole-of-government approach badly needed for operations other than war (OOTW). Then as now, the evolution of the alliance sees a growing equality between Washington and Tokyo, with greater burden sharing by the latter. Japan, it seems, may have arrived as a major security actor.

A Tougher Alliance, but How about Collective Self-Defense?

Regional actors will have noted that the guidelines have broadened previous geographical and functional limitations on the alliance. This simply brings the guidelines up to date with all that has occurred on the ground (or water) in terms of Japan's growing involvement in international stability operations, from Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and the growing appetite for European-Japan security cooperation. The guidelines do not give Japan the remit to broaden its geographic scope; rather, they provide the space for Japanese politicians to resolve that remit domestically. Furthermore, Japanese and U.S. forces can now cooperate in more types of operations. U.S. alliance managers noted with approval that Japan has open space in the guidelines in the section covering ballistic missile cooperation for it to shoot down weapons headed toward the United States, a major issue when considering the threat from North Korea. In line with a Japanese cabinet decision made in July 2014, Japanese forces can now help any "foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan," on the condition that the attack "threatens Japan's survival and poses a clear danger to fundamentally overturn (Japanese) people's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." As senior Japanese officials made clear at a CSIS event on May 1, this remains a high threshold, open to interpretation.

For states like Vietnam and the Philippines, facing the brunt of Chinese assertiveness, this will remain a vague commitment. It does not guarantee that Japan will engage in third-country defense willy-nilly, but it does open the door to that possibility occurring in the future. For allies like Australia and South Korea, who have close working relationships with the Self-Defense Forces, this will be a provision to watch with interest in the coming years. This adds an element of realism to the growing interconnectedness

between Japan and other U.S. allies and alliance networks and enables further evolution. A number of new domains, such as cyber, space, and small-scale attacks have been added, which also seek to deal with the growth of asymmetric, across-the-board attacks that Chinese tactical literature seems to favor. For U.S. allies in Europe, such as NATO member states, the development of cyber and intelligence cooperation with Japan became much more plausible with the advent of this limited form of collective self-defense.

Deterring and Strengthening

It will be interesting to see how China reacts to the tightening of the U.S.-Japan Alliance, perhaps giving them pause in their salami-slicing expansion into Japanese territorial waters. The Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM) reduces daylight between U.S. and Japan policymaking, institutionalizing policymaking among both military and civilian agencies. The bilateral planning component has also been strengthened and upgraded, again bringing in nonmilitary agencies into the process. The forces and government agencies will be more harmonized and better equipped to deal with operations other than war, noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO), and “gray zone” provocations. In dealing with any North Korean wartime or collapse scenario, these elements are essential. However, given the steady growth of Chinese naval assertiveness of the past few years, it may be Beijing rather than Pyongyang that triggers their need. How these functions look on paper is one thing; how they operate in practice, will be another.

One thing is certain: Chinese encroachment in the East China Sea will no longer find a surprised or passive alliance, as the guidelines put forward a range of proactive practices and institutions. The alliance will be more resilient: assets will be co-protected, while the addition of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) cooperation in the guidelines will enhance maritime and aerospace domain awareness, narrowing the possibility of surprise. And if surprises do come—and they invariably do in international relations—then the improved bilateral planning and policy coordination should better prepare U.S. and Japanese forces. The upshot of all this is likely to be a growing inability for China or North Korea to operate their forces “between the cracks of the alliance,” in the so-called safety of the gray zone. However, faced with such resilience, Beijing may pursue its options in other parts of the region. Frustrated in the East China Sea, Chinese expansionism may accelerate in the South China Sea. However, even there, the guidelines have developed a number of potential solutions. The primary one is that of capacity-building assistance; giving Southeast Asian states the wherewithal to protect or at least maintain their present maritime borders. A second, higher function is that of providing leadership for the region. The U.S.-Japan Alliance has long aspired to cement the region through its security partnerships. This has been apparent in its approach to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. These guidelines signal to other in the region Tokyo and Washington’s resolve to meet future challenges with firmness and may encourage growing solidarity with the alliance.

Forward the Alliance

It is difficult to predict how Beijing will react the new U.S.-Japan Alliance. Unfortunately, its track record isn’t the best. Wherever it has suffered resistance to its ambitions, it has denounced that resistance as “containment,” a useful communications strategy, which keeps adversaries on the back foot. The irony is that continuing its attempts to secure the waters of its neighbors may well one day push regional states into just such a policy. Hopefully, such an outcome can be avoided as the regional balance of power continues to evolve and to shift. It is still unclear how a potential Chinese economic slowdown could affect events, promoting either further assertiveness or perhaps new diplomatic overtures. Certainly, the guidelines and the overall inter-networking of U.S. and Western alliances will contribute to regional and global security, acting as a deterrent to those who would seek to reorder with force, in addition to dealing with issues of human security. One truism remains: the motives of political actors remain flexible and malleable; deterrence only has to fail once for disaster to ensue. However, the militaries of the United States and Japan are tasked with protecting other states with like-minded values, regional democracies that look to the alliance for security. The guidelines would certainly seem to be a step in the right direction, but if they are to deter and to protect, then the U.S.-Japan Alliance will have to bolster and grow its capabilities. Furthermore, the Japanese public will have to debate and support this new iteration of the alliance. Whether that will happen remains to be seen.

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