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Maritime Cooperation in the Pacific: The United States and Its Partners

Masashi Nishihara

Today Japan and the United States, two Pacific powers, together generate one-third of the world's gross national product. As large maritime nations, both depend upon the safe use of global sea-lanes for their respective national securities. What does their maritime cooperation in the Pacific mean for them and for the world? What are the opportunities for, and constraints of, their naval cooperation?

Answers to these questions may be approached by responding to a set of issues:

- Do the Japanese perceive threats to their national security in the same way the Americans do?
- How is Japan trying to meet its perceived threats?
- What is the current state of Japanese-U.S. maritime cooperation?
- What are the major sources of difficulty in promoting maritime cooperation between the two countries?
- What is the prospect for Japan-U.S. cooperation in this field?

Japanese Perceptions of Security Threats

On the whole, the Japanese are not as concerned about external military threats to their national security as the Americans appear to be. The Japanese people are confident that the United States is still strong enough to take care of the major military problems around the world. Despite the presence of some 50 Soviet Army divisions deployed in the Far East, geographical separation from the Asian Continent gives the Japanese a sense of ease. Economic threats are more worrisome.

Today there are two types of economic threats. The first involves the interruption of the supply of vital natural resources such as oil from the Middle East, and commodities like nickel, cobalt, and silicon. Eighty-four percent of Japan's total energy consumption depends on imports, while

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dependency for nickel, cobalt, and silicon—essential for the country's electronic and other high-tech industries—is 100 percent. The safety of such supply is dependent on the political stability of the suppliers, e.g., the Middle East, and the security of sea-lanes between these suppliers and Japan. The second type of economic threat is protectionism, particularly the kind growing in the United States and some European countries. Needless to say, U.S. protectionism is being stimulated by huge trade deficits with Japan. But this is not an issue here. The issue is the perception that the Japanese have of the impact of emerging U.S. economic nationalism on the international economy, so vital for Japanese economic security.

This is not meant to downgrade the serious nature of military threats to Japan. We are increasingly concerned about the growing Soviet military presence in the Western Pacific. Tokyo has territorial disputes with the Russians over the four islands northeast of Hokkaidō. According to an official Japanese source, the Soviets deployed 1 army division plus some 40 MiG-23s and several MI-24 attack helicopters into this area. Last year they conducted landing exercises on one of the islands, an exercise applicable to a landing on Hokkaidō itself. Also during this period, the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force intercepted Soviet military planes approaching our air space on 940 separate occasions. The Soviet-North Korean military cooperation, which appears to be deepening, is another source of concern. The current anti-Chun student revolt in South Korea must be seen by Pyongyang as a successful, growing sign of the “people's struggle against the fascist regime” and Pyongyang leaders may well be eyeing an opportunity for intervention.

China today does not worry us, and we are not afraid of a developing China. We share the U.S. interest in helping build a stable and secure pro-Western China, one that can balance the Soviet threat. But this is not to say that we could not feel threatened by a developed China. The Chinese are nationalistic, as we all are, and they are ambitious, both economically and militarily.

Japanese Measures to Cope with Threats

Japan has taken several measures to meet potential economic threats. First of all, we have undertaken diplomatic efforts to maintain friendly relations with those countries that have important natural resources and to promote the political stability of the regions from which natural resources come, to meet Japan's needs. For the last few years the Tokyo government has tried, although not successfully, to mediate between Iran and Iraq. We have also attempted to reduce our dependence upon the Middle East for oil by diversifying the sources of supply. Our current imports of oil come from Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, China, and Mexico as well as from the Middle East, and hopefully from Alaska in the future. Japan's construction of nuclear

power plants also helps avoid excessive reliance on Middle East oil. Finally, the country has increased its stockpiles of oil and now has a reserve good for over 100 days.

Where military threats are concerned, we have taken two measures: One is to try to speed up the process of modernizing our Self-Defense Force, composed of the following manpower: land forces 156,000; naval forces 44,000; and air forces 44,500. The other measure is to maintain and strengthen the Security Treaty with the United States that has been in force since 1952.

Japanese forces, by the current interpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution, have to be defensive in nature. Under the binational security arrangements, we expect U.S. forces to assume the function of "offensive" operations in defending Japan. While distinction between offensive and defensive operations is a nebulous concept, it is a politically important one in Japan. In the last 5 years, Japan has put relatively larger emphasis on the navy and air force than it has on the army. By 1990 we will have procured 100 P-3C antisubmarine warfare planes and 187 F-15 fighters. In addition to E-2C early warning planes, we will soon deploy an over-the-horizon radar system. With these arms, Japan's capability to monitor Soviet military activities will be enhanced significantly.

The Current State of Maritime Cooperation

The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation, adopted in 1978, provide a basic framework for maritime cooperation between the two countries. In accordance with these guidelines, Japan undertakes the defense of important ports and straits, ASW operations around itself, and the protection of commercial ships, while U.S. naval forces supporting Japanese operations conduct offensive operations. To give substance to this framework, Prime Minister Suzuki stated in 1981 that Japan would have the capability to close off the three international straits along its own islands and defend its 1,000-mile sea-lanes southward.

Frequent joint naval exercises undertaken by the two forces, plus the U.S.-sponsored multinational exercise called RIMPAC, substantiate naval cooperation in the Pacific. One of the Nakasone government's contributions has been to modify the past constitutional interpretation so that it is now constitutionally possible for Japanese naval forces to help defend U.S. naval ships outside Japanese territory if the latter are on their way to the defense of Japan.

Constraints on Maritime Cooperation

While being fully aware of the importance of maritime cooperation between the two Pacific powers, the Japanese nevertheless find several

sources of difficulty in developing such cooperation as fully as the United States may expect. First, there are constitutional constraints. As stated earlier, Article 9 is being interpreted as allowing Japan use of its arms solely for self-defense purposes. It means that Japan cannot assist in the defense of the United States if such action is interpreted to defend the United States only, and not Japan also. The Japan-U.S. Security Treaty is, in this sense, technically an unequal treaty with asymmetrical obligations.

Second, political factors are also important. The Japanese Government in 1976 adopted the policy that defense expenditure should remain below 1 percent of the GNP. Though the latest budget exceeds that figure, it is only by a miniscule amount. The fact is, the budgetary limit constrains the modernization and expansion of the armed forces. The 1976 policy, aimed at fending off the pacifist criticism that increased defense spending would lead to the "revival of militarism," is still in effect. In fact, this suspicion that Japan may become a militarist nation again also remains quite strong among the Asians. This forces all Japanese Prime Ministers to proclaim during their visits to other Asian countries that their nation shall never become a military power. Yet the suspicion persists, suggesting that Japan must be careful not to expand its military power too quickly.

A more serious source of difficulty may lie in differences between the two Pacific allies themselves. As noted earlier, the two nations do not necessarily share the Soviet military threat in the same way. These two nations, having different geostrategic priorities, may value conflicts in East Asia differently. The U.S. strategy of horizontal escalation by which the United States would open up armed tensions in different parts of the world, in order to force the Soviets to disperse their forces, may not meet Japanese interests. If the United States should treat the Korean Peninsula as a theater for horizontal escalation, for instance, it would certainly endanger Japan. In other words, what the United States may consider a tactical issue, may be a strategic issue for Japan.

Inherent difficulties in the implementation of naval cooperation at the tactical level should not be underestimated. Standardization and interoperability of arms are indispensable if cooperation is to be fully realized, but different ships have different capabilities. Furthermore, officers are concerned about how joint naval defense is to be coordinated with joint air defense and how conventional naval defense is to be coupled with nuclear escalation. Additionally, the ever-present language problem can become a serious barrier to binational defense cooperation.

Prospects of Japan-U.S. Cooperation

We tend to think that an alliance, once formed, should and will work well. Particularly, the United States tends to expect its allies to think like it does—about the Soviet power, Afghanistan, Poland, international terrorism,

maritime cooperation, and what have you. If its allies do not share U.S. concerns, the American Government expresses unhappiness and, at times, displeasure. Recent examples include New Zealand's rejection of U.S. nuclear-capable warships and President Reagan's announcement that the United States may scrap the SALT II Treaty. Basically then, it cultivates an attitude whereby many Americans perceive Japan as "a free rider" on security matters.

The Japan-U.S. alliance may, or can, mean different things to the two nations. Washington expects Japan to follow its policy priorities, but Tokyo sometimes tends to work out its own policy priorities. Our approaches in dealing with North Korea, Vietnam, the Soviets, and Iran, among others, are different.

This suggests that Japan and the United States should expand the common areas of strategic thinking. Yet they should not expect to reach one integrated strategy; rather, more realistically, we should strive to make our respective strategies more closely coordinated. No one can expect complete understanding among allies. We should assume that managing an alliance is difficult because of the cultural, historical, and geostrategic differences.

Yet, as Japan assumes a greater sense of international responsibility, both in economic and security fields, and as the United States entertains a greater understanding of Japan's positions, there will grow a stronger possibility that the two countries will share strategic priorities. These two great oceanic powers, which generate over one-third of the world's goods and services, can and should play a significant role in maintaining the current international economic order and a favorable balance of power. The binational cooperation in maritime defense promises to be a key to such a role.

