

An Unexpected Opportunity to Rethink the Alliance

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The United States and Japan are at a strategic crossroads regarding how to reaffirm the nature of the U.S.-Japan Alliance. For the first time in the last half-century, Japan has experienced a change of government from the Liberal Democratic Party to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). This historical change has provided both Japan and the U.S. with challenges as well as opportunities. While the issue of the Futenma Relocation Facilities is causing serious problems in the management of the U.S.-Japan Alliance, it has also inadvertently provided an opportunity for both the Japanese and Americans to rethink how they will work together in the future.

As is well known, the alliance has an inherent asymmetry, in which the U.S. offers security assistance in return for Japan's provision of U.S. bases within its territory. In the last twenty years however, the two countries have been trying to adjust this asymmetry by expanding Japan's roles in international security, particularly in global terms. Japan's participation in international peacekeeping operations began in 1991 with mine sweeping operations by the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force after the Gulf War, followed by the dispatch of Japan's first UN peacekeepers to Cambodia in 1992. The 1997 revision of the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation stipulated that the scope of the alliance would extend to regional and global security in addition to the defense of Japan, which during the Cold War had been regarded as the single most important function of the alliance. Today, the two countries are faced with an increasing need to deal with global and regional challenges posed by global terrorism, North Korea's nuclear programs, and the rise of new global powers such as China, India, and Russia.

The two countries should answer at least two vital questions. The first question is whether the two countries should remain on course in expanding the scope of the alliance in global issues by alleviating its asymmetry, as they have done since 9/11. On the contrary, the two countries may want to adjust the course by limiting the roles of the alliance to regional security by focusing primarily on the defense of Japan. The second question is whether the two countries should expand or reduce their mutual

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dependence in security affairs. The DPJ administration has been seeking for a more equal partnership with the U.S. There are two ways to realize that goal, namely by expanding the equilibrium or by contracting it. The former would necessitate that Japan play a more active role in regional and/or global peace and stability efforts, while enhancing its cooperation with the U.S. by sustaining the presence of the U.S. forces in Japan, though with a possibly smaller footprint. The latter would result in lower expectations by Japan towards the U.S. role in its defense, including a significantly smaller footprint by U.S. forces, while reducing U.S. expectations towards the utility of its own forward deployment. Standing at an inadvertent crossroads, the two countries are now faced with the need to make strategic decisions for the future of the alliance.