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A Dramatic Change in the Japan-U.S. Security Framework

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The Japan-U.S. security relationship is in the midst of a dramatic change. Such change has not simply been limited to actions taken by the two governments, but has now been expressed in documentary form. Specifically, they are the "U.S.-Japan Alliance: Transformation and Realignment for the Future" published in October 2005 and the "U.S.-Japan Roadmap for Realignment" published in May this year. This is far more serious than resolving the Futenma U.S. base issue that has attracted so much attention in Japan. They are without doubt important documents that will decide Japan's future course, and yet there has been no domestic discussion. There is a world of a difference between how the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty - the framework for today's security arrangement - was produced and revised through political turbulence and fierce debate.

The fundamental nature of the transformation to be brought about by the two documents becomes apparent through comparison with the existing Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which has served as the backbone of the Japan-U.S. security relationship to this day. Based on this comparison, I would like to examine some of the aspects of the "U.S.-Japan Alliance: Transformation and Realignment for the Future" that particularly warrant attention.

First of all, Japan-U.S. security cooperation has been redefined as a pursuit of "regional and global common strategic objectives," giving prominence to the "global" arena in seeking cooperation. In comparison, the Security Treaty had limited the regional scope of cooperation to Japan and the Far East.

Japan is expected to play an active role, as seen in expressions such as "the U.S. and Japan contribute as appropriate based on their respective capabilities" and "take necessary measures to establish effective posture." The Security Treaty, on the contrary, had imposed a check on Japan's actions by quoting from the Japanese Constitution.

The Security Treaty had given prominence to the United Nations by including a reference to its "purposes and principles" that are not found in the recent documents, which instead emphasize the common strategy of the United States and Japan.

The document states in specific terms the need for integration and cooperation on a broad scope - "from unit tactical level through strategic consultations" - to accomplish the above-mentioned objectives, calling for "close and continuous policy and operational coordination" and "enhancing information sharing and intelligence cooperation," "expanding training opportunities in Japan and the United States" and promoting "shared use of facilities".

Major changes are thus expected to occur in the Japan-U.S. relationship, though Japan will be mainly responsible for the changes. The Japanese side is no longer plagued by its past dilemma of "undesired involvement" and ultimate "abandonment" in its relationship with the United States.

Let us now consider the U.S. standpoint. The strategic understanding between Japan and the United States since the latter's occupation was that Japan will join the Western camp, will provide bases for U.S. Forces and will not possess power projection capabilities - the power to launch an offensive attack. These principles have apparently been retained in the new arrangement. Particular emphasis has been placed on this final point, as seen in the statement that "U.S. strike capabilities and the nuclear deterrence provided by the United States remain an essential complement to Japan's defense." Meanwhile, Japan is to "defend itself" in cases including "invasion of remote islands," with the apparent intention of avoiding U.S. involvement in conflicts over the Senkaku Islands and Takeshima.

Thus a new framework for Japan-U.S. security has been formed. In future, the two countries are expected to accelerate bilateral cooperation based on this framework. Arrangements are already underway for joint military exercises. However, this doesn't mean that all is well. In fact, a serious problem lies hidden underneath - a powerful cooperative relationship is being forged without addressing the gap in fundamental strategy that exists between Japan and the United States. What are the two countries' respective strategies in the "global" arena? Since the end of the Cold War, and particularly since 1993, the United States has made its point clear. The North-South issue is the central theme, and democratization will be sought by offering the choice of a regime change. And to that end, it will take military action as necessary. This is also clearly expressed in the current documents, whose goal is to "improve the international security environment."

Now, let us turn to Japan. Japan characterizes its approach to cooperation beyond the Far East, on the international stage, as "humanitarian" and "without human sacrifice." Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro has also made comments that toe this line. However, this approach is not shared by the United States, which considers "humanitarian" cooperation that doesn't entail "human sacrifice" as merely a transitional phase and seeks "burden sharing" of the risks.

Most Japanese are happy enough to reap the benefits, economic and otherwise, from closer relations with the United States. They are not following specific events in detail. Their view is

perhaps based on the thinking that Japan should give the go ahead as long as there are no problems, but should make its position clear once problems do arise – as in the Japan-U.S. issue over beef. A substantial gap exists at the public level with regard to actions to be pursued on the international stage. And as such, the new bilateral security arrangement may be carrying a flashpoint that could cause friction between the two countries or flare up into Japan's domestic political issue in the future.

(This is the text of an article by Prof. MAGOSAKI Ukeru, Professor at Japan's National Defense Academy and former Japanese Ambassador to Iran, which was originally posted in the JITOW ("Japan In Their Own Words") column of the English-Speaking Union of Japan on July 11, 2006.)