



SASAKAWA USA
Forum Issue № 3

Next Steps for U.S.-Japan Security Cooperation

Rachel Hoff

Director of Defense Analysis
American Action Forum

Abstract

In recent years, the United States and Japan have taken significant steps toward a stronger security alliance. Three major accomplishments stand out: the reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution, Japan's new security legislation, and the revision of the bilateral defense guidelines. These breakthroughs have taken place in the context of crucial security imperatives. The Asia-Pacific faces an uncertain security environment, with China's military buildup, the North Korean nuclear and missile threats, and a revanchist Russia—while the global security situation continues to deteriorate, with evolving terrorist threats, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and relatively new challenges in the domains of cyber and outer space. While recent efforts to remove some of the legal and structural obstacles that have prohibited Japan from playing a larger role in the alliance have set the stage for a new era of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation, serious challenges remain to implement and operationalize the new reforms and mechanisms. This paper reviews the recent progress and identifies important issues and differences that the United States and Japan must address to achieve even deeper security cooperation and truly transform the alliance.

Introduction

This year is arguably one of the most important in the fifty-six-year history of the U.S.-Japan alliance. In recent years, the alliance realized three major accomplishments: the reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution, Japan's passage of new security legislation, and the revision of the bilateral defense guidelines. Together, these breakthroughs have changed the landscape of the U.S.-Japan alliance and set the stage for 2016 to be a year of real progress toward deeper security cooperation.

This opportunity for progress comes at an important moment. The security environment in the Asia-Pacific faces an uncertain future, particularly with China's military buildup, the North Korean nuclear and missile threats, and a revanchist Russia. Meanwhile, the global security situation continues to deteriorate, with evolving terrorist threats, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and relatively new challenges in the domains of cyber and outer space.

To meet these regional and global challenges, the U.S.-Japan alliance remains crucial. Yet for years, Japan has been punching below its weight in international affairs. A combination of legal restrictions and structural realities has prohibited Japan from playing a larger role in the Asia-Pacific and beyond—despite its size, wealth, technological edge, and strategic importance. Japan's internal constraints have also served as barriers to cooperation with the United States and diminished the strength of this critical alliance. Recent progress to overcome those obstacles, however, has set the stage for a new era of defense cooperation. While in one sense the greatest challenge for this new era is simply implementation, there remain several important limitations on U.S.-Japanese security cooperation in the years to come.

Evolution of Japan's Security Posture

In the aftermath of World War II, the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security set the parameters for the U.S.-Japan defense alliance: the United States would have the right to military bases in Japan in exchange for the assurance that it would provide defense for Japan, if attacked.¹ Together, the basing rights and security guarantee laid the groundwork for a robust and important defense alliance between the two nations that has served as the cornerstone of peace, security, and stability in the Asia-Pacific region ever since.

A variety of constraints, however, particularly with regard to Japan's security posture, hindered deeper security cooperation between the two allies. After World War II,

¹ "Japan-U.S. Security Treaty." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Accessed March 24, 2016. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>.

the Japanese constitution, drafted in large part by American military officers, explicitly renounced war and prohibited the maintenance of armed forces in order to prevent the resurgence of Japanese militarism.² With American encouragement following the Korean War, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) were established in 1954. Since then, these forces have served for practical purposes as Japan's military, but continue to operate under restrictions preventing the JSDF from being a "normal" military.

Over time, Japan began to increase its role in the alliance, first as the Cold War saw an expansion of the Soviet and Chinese military presence in the region. In 1978, Japan and the United States signed the first bilateral Guidelines for Defense Cooperation, which provided a framework for the division of roles and responsibilities for the two militaries. Under these guidelines, U.S. and Japanese forces began training together to ensure interoperability.

After the criticism Japan received for its role in the 1991 Gulf War, when it provided funds but refused to send troops, the government passed a law providing the legal framework to send JSDF forces abroad to participate in international peacekeeping and relief operations. Following the September 11th terrorist attacks, Japan sent support and reconstruction troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. More recently, Japan sent JSDF personnel and materiel to the Horn of Africa to conduct anti-piracy operations. As a part of this mission, Japan opened its first overseas base since World War II, in Djibouti in 2011. Each of these steps represents a gradual expansion of Japan's international role and its ability to contribute to its mutual security goals with the United States.

After the end of the Cold War, China's rise and North Korean provocation continued to exacerbate regional instability. In particular, North Korea's missile launch in 1993 and the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996 raised serious questions about limitations to bilateral response contingencies, given the constraints of the original defense guidelines. To expand the scenarios for cooperation, the United States and Japan revised the guidelines in 1997. Specifically, Japanese forces would now be allowed to conduct military operations not just on the homeland but also in surrounding areas. Immediately after North Korea's first long-range ballistic missile test in 1998, which flew over Japanese airspace, Japan invested heavily in a missile defense program, developed and produced in close cooperation with the United States.³ These actions were welcomed in Washington as an important progression toward Japan taking more responsibility for its own defense.

² "The Constitution of Japan." Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. Accessed March 24, 2016. japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html.

³ Hoff, Rachel. "U.S.-Japan Missile Defense Cooperation: Increasing Security and Cutting Costs." American Action Forum. December 2, 2015. <http://americanactionforum.org/research/u.s.-japan-missile-defense-cooperation>.

Japan's post-war constitution and self-imposed restrictions on the JSDF not only placed practical limits on its military activities but also contributed to a deep sense of pacifism among the Japanese people. That pacifism further constrains the Japanese security posture and continues to effect the defense alliance with the United States.

New Security Imperative

The security context for the U.S.-Japan alliance has changed significantly in recent years. The rise of China, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, and emerging challenges in cyber and outer space have combined to present the most complex threat environment in the history of the alliance.

China's massive military buildup is the greatest change to the regional order. The growth in Chinese defense spending and military capabilities threatens to shift the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. The decades-long effort to invest in both air and naval forces is bearing out in more recent aggression in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Japan is, of course, particularly concerned with the East China Sea, where the Chinese contest Japanese sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands. The United States has stated that its treaty with Japan covers all Japanese territory, including the Senkaku Islands—so Chinese aggression there would trigger U.S. security commitments.⁴ In both the East and South China Seas, China's growing anti-access and aerial denial capabilities present a threat to U.S. and Japanese forces, territories, and interests.

The combination of a nuclear program with a growing missile arsenal makes the North Korean threat clear and present to Japan. The prospect that a nuclear-armed, long-range missile could reach Japanese territory or U.S. military assets in the region presents a mutual security threat. Japan is also dealing with increasing insecurity to its north, as Russia is increasing its military activity, incursions into Japanese airspace, and assertiveness over territorial claims.

In addition to these rising regional challenges, new threats have emerged in cyber and outer space. The threats in these two domains have changed dramatically since the U.S.-Japan defense guidelines were last revised in the 1990s. The dependence upon information systems and consequent vulnerability of critical infrastructure to cyber-attack present new concerns, both for governments and for private industry, as both state and non-state actors engage in malicious behavior. Space-based assets provide critical support

⁴ The White House. Office of the Press Secretary. "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan in Joint Press Conference." News release, April 28, 2015. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/04/28/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-abe-japan-joint-press-confere>.

to security surveillance and intelligence operations. Counter-space and anti-satellite threats aimed to deny access to these important assets pose a major threat to a wide range of capabilities.

Each of these situations demands greater bilateral efforts from the United States and Japan to deter mutual threats and secure shared interests. Both regionally and in the global commons, the deteriorating security environment has added new urgency to overcoming obstacles to greater cooperation between these two important allies.

New Era of Cooperation

In recent years, there has been significant progress toward reducing the barriers to cooperation and paving the way for a stronger U.S.-Japan security alliance. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has ushered in important changes to Japan's security posture: first, by creating a National Security Council and issuing Japan's first National Security Strategy; second, by relaxing the arms exports policy; and third, by increasing defense spending.

Japan established its National Security Council (NSC), modeled after the American interagency body, in 2013. Later that same year, Japan published its first National Security Strategy.⁵ This document enshrined Abe's vision of Japan becoming a "proactive contributor to peace." The implication here was that Japan would begin to take the initiative in foreign affairs, working alongside allies like the United States to help ensure security, stability, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific and the broader international community. Creating the NSC also helped to increase coordination and reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies in Japanese security policy. This centralization allows for closer cooperation with the United States and other allies. Notably, from the very beginning, the office has had hotlines to its American and British counterparts.⁶

For decades, Japan did not engage in arms exports due to a self-imposed ban. What began as the so-called Three Principles policy, prohibiting arms sales to countries that were communist, under the United Nations arms embargo, or involved in international conflicts, later evolved into a full ban on arms sales activity.⁷ Part of Japan's first National Security Strategy relaxed the prohibition, introducing a new set of Three Principles for arms

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Statement by Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan on Adoption of the 'National Security Strategy (NSS)'" News release, December 17, 2013. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_000141.html.

⁶ "Japan's New NSC to Have Hotline with U.S., Britain." Japan Today. December 4, 2013. <http://www.japantoday.com/category/politics/view/japans-new-nsc-to-have-hotline-with-u-s-britain>.

⁷ "Japan's Policies on the Control of Arms Exports." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Accessed March 24, 2016. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/policy>.

sales. Exports would be permitted as long as they do not interfere with peace and security, are limited and verified, and are controlled from transfer to third parties. The new principles also updated the list of banned export destinations from communist countries to terrorist organizations. The relaxation of the arms exports policy reduced a longstanding barrier to closer defense industrial cooperation between the United States and Japan on technology transfer, which could have major ramifications for the Asia-Pacific region. Given the technological edge of Japanese companies in general, integrating Japan's defense industry into the global market could open the door for significant international cooperation.

Historically, Japan's defense spending has been capped at one percent of gross domestic product. Since Prime Minister Abe returned to office in 2012, Japan has seen four consecutive years of rising defense spending, after more than a decade of decreases to the military budget. While due partly to the weakened Japanese yen, the increases are also a response to Japan's changing security environment and intensifying regional threats—particularly fortifying its defense position in the Senkaku Islands vis-à-vis China, which spends about two percent of its much larger gross domestic product on defense.⁸

Taken together, these incremental changes over the last few years have shifted Japan's security posture and paved the way for greater cooperation with the United States. The three greatest accomplishments to secure a closer alliance, however, were Abe's reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution, the bilateral revision of the defense guidelines, and Japan's passage of new security legislation.

New Interpretation of the Constitution

While the Japanese security posture has evolved over time, fundamental constitutional restrictions remained. Japan's forces have never been permitted to engage in combat, except in the case of direct attack. Even then, individual self-defense is limited to circumstances: "(1) when Japan is facing an imminent and illegitimate act of aggression; (2) [when] there is no other means to counter the threat; and (3) when the use of force in self-defense is limited to the minimum necessary level."⁹ Together, these conditions provide the only exception to the constitution's language renouncing war "as a sovereign right of the nation."

The Japanese government historically interpreted a constitutional ban on collective self-defense, despite the fact that the United Nations Charter enshrines the inherent rights

⁸ Reynolds, Isabel. "Japan Defense Budget to Increase for First Time in 11 Years." Bloomberg. January 30, 2013. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-01-29/japan-s-defense-spending-to-increase-for-first-time-in-11-years>.

⁹ "Collective Self-defense." Sasakawa USA. October 27, 2015. <http://spfusa.org/research/collective-self-defense>.

to both individual and collective self-defense.¹⁰ Under collective self-defense, a country may view an attack on another country as an attack on itself and therefore act in “self-defense,” even if its own territory is not directly attacked. The constitutional interpretation that Japan was prohibited from exercising its right of collective self-defense meant that the JSDF could not come to the defense of foreign military forces or civilians—including American military bases or assets that were under attack while protecting Japan.

Shinzo Abe began the process of addressing concerns over the constitution’s interpreted ban on collective self-defense during his first term as prime minister, but it was not until he returned to office in 2012 that he was able to make real progress toward reform. In June of 2014, after two years of deliberation, the commission recommended a constitutional reinterpretation that would allow Japan to exercise the unrestricted right to collective self-defense—a significant change from previous historical interpretations. Abe’s cabinet approved a reinterpretation of collective self-defense, as follows:

The Government has reached a conclusion that not only when an armed attack against Japan occurs but also when an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan’s survival and poses a clear danger to fundamentally overturn people’s right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, and when there is no other appropriate means available to repel the attack and ensure Japan’s survival and protect its people, use of force to the minimum extent necessary should be interpreted to be permitted under the Constitution as measures for self-defense in accordance with the basic logic of the Government’s view to date.¹¹

Importantly, the three conditions that applied to individual self-defense would apply to the exercise of collective self-defense, as well.

In asserting the right to exercise collective self-defense, Japan sent a message to both allies and adversaries that it was willing to play a greater role in maintaining regional and global peace and security. To the United States, it was an important assurance that Japan was a reliable ally. In the narrowest sense, the reinterpretation meant that Japan could defend American military forces, bases, or assets from attack. More broadly, it represented a substantive step toward greater burden-sharing within the alliance.

¹⁰ “Charter of the United Nations Chapter VII.” United Nations. Accessed March 24, 2016. <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-vii>.

¹¹ “Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan’s Survival and Protect Its People.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. July 1, 2014. http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page23e_000273.html.

New Defense Guidelines

In April of 2015, the United States and Japan announced the first update of the bilateral Guidelines for Defense Cooperation in nearly twenty years. The goal of the new defense guidelines was primarily to promote “seamless, robust, flexible, and effective” cooperation.¹² In the context of the constitutional reinterpretation, the new guidelines provide a roadmap to transform the alliance. Effectively, the new guidelines operationalize the exercise of collective self-defense for Japan, reflecting much of the same language from the Abe cabinet’s constitutional reinterpretation. The new defense guidelines expand Japan’s role within the alliance and represent one more step toward greater burden-sharing.

The defense guidelines also lay the groundwork for sustained cooperation that is not tied to particular contingencies or emergencies. This is most clearly reflected in the creation of the Alliance Coordination Mechanism. As a standing body, the mechanism will institutionalize the kind of cooperation that U.S. and Japanese forces have engaged in for decades on a conditional basis in response to particular events, such as Operation Tomodachi following the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011.¹³ The new guidelines allow U.S. and Japanese forces to coordinate on both policy and operational levels, separately from emergency contingencies. By planning, training, and operating together in peacetime, the alliance will be better prepared for contingency response during emergencies. This was a major step toward interoperability between U.S. and Japanese forces.

New Security Legislation

In order to fully realize the progress promised in the new defense guidelines, Prime Minister Abe proposed passing a series of eleven security-related bills through the national legislature.¹⁴ The main purpose of this legislative package was to provide the legal mechanisms to exercise collective self-defense. The debate in the legislature proved contentious, as public opposition to Abe’s reforms intensified. After difficult negotiations, the legislature passed the package of bills in September of 2015. While in the end the legislation did relax many restrictions, it did not fully authorize the unrestricted right of

¹² “The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation.” Ministry of Defense of Japan. April 27, 2015.

http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/shishin_20150427e.html.

¹³ Johnston, Eric. “Operation Tomodachi a Huge Success, but Was It a One-off?” Japan Times. March 3, 2012.

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/03/03/national/operation-tomodachi-a-huge-success-but-was-it-a-one-off/>.

¹⁴ “Press Conference by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe Following the Cabinet Decision on the ‘Legislation for Peace and Security.’” Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. May 14, 2015.

http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201505/0514kaiken.html.

collective self-defense. By providing greater flexibility, however, the legislation provides the JSDF the ability to plan, train, and operate with U.S. forces.

The debate surrounding the security legislation sparked public protests and left the government with low approval ratings.¹⁵ In the end, despite the enormous effort and political capital it has taken to pass, the new legislation allows the right to exercise collective self-defense only in limited circumstances—namely, when an attack against a foreign country represents a threat to Japan’s survival, when there are no other means available to respond, and when the response is limited to the minimum use of force necessary. The legislation also gives the JSDF the ability to provide logistical support to the U.S. military in overseas missions protecting Japan’s security. The legislation significantly changes the rules of engagement for the JSDF during peacekeeping activities. Finally, under the new legislation, deploying the JSDF overseas would no longer require special legislation to authorize each mission, though it would still require legislative approval.

During the debate, Abe provided a number of specific examples of what would be allowed and prohibited under the new legislation. Japan could protect U.S. and other foreign military assets while they are engaging in operations that contribute to Japan’s defense. It could send JSDF forces to participate in multilateral peace and security operations within or outside the United Nations framework. Those forces would be allowed to protect foreign civilians or troops. Japan could provide logistical support to foreign military operations that have an important influence on the security of Japan, wherever they take place. Abe clarified, however, that Japan would not provide logistics support for the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State nor send troops to fight in a conflict similar to the 2003 war in Iraq.¹⁶

Restrictions and limitations notwithstanding, when combined with the reinterpretation of the constitution and revision of the defense guidelines, the new legislation helped to provide the infrastructure for closer U.S.-Japan security cooperation. The efforts to rethink traditional paradigms, relax legal restrictions, and reform institutional barriers served to strengthen the alliance and prepare it to face the many regional and global threats of the 21st century. The challenge ahead is to operationalize the new avenues for cooperation that were created by these hard-fought reforms, as they come into effect in 2016.

¹⁵ Borah, Rupakjyoti. “Japan’s Controversial Security Bills Pass in the Upper House. Now What?” *The Diplomat*. September 19, 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/japans-controversial-security-bills-pass-in-the-upper-house-now-what>.

¹⁶ Sieg, Linda, Nobuhiro Kubo, and Robert Birsel. “Factbox: Main Elements of Japan’s Security Legislation.” *Reuters*. September 14, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-security-factbox-idUSKCN0RE2F820150914>.

Next Steps

Peacekeeping Operations

The first implementation of Japan's right to collective self-defense will likely be for JSDF forces engaged in peacekeeping operations. JSDF troops are currently deployed to a peacekeeping mission in South Sudan. Mostly engaged in infrastructure projects, their role was previously limited due to restrictions on collective self-defense. With the change in rules of engagement for these forces, their expanded role could now include the protection of local civilians and foreign forces.

Regional Contingencies

There has been more focus, particularly in the United States, on planning for regional contingencies, given Japan's recent legal reform and the new coordination mechanism. While the activities of the Alliance Coordination Mechanism are not likely to be public, there are a number of regional contingencies for which planning would prove useful—many of which involve so-called “grey zone” scenarios that fall short of a military attack but still represent a security threat. Delineating responsibilities among U.S. forces, JSDF troops, and law enforcement will be key to ensuring an effective bilateral response.

In the coming years, the rise of China presents the most important strategic challenge for the U.S.-Japan alliance. The East China Sea would be the most natural place to further increase Japan's role in the alliance, given that a scenario involving Japanese territory would qualify for individual self-defense. A South China Sea contingency, on the other hand, may test the limits of Japanese collective self-defense under the new legislation and guidelines. In both scenarios, the United States and Japan should counter Chinese aggression or “grey zone” pressure. By strengthening the alliance's deterrent posture, asserting and defending territorial claims and the freedom of navigation, and bolstering the security capabilities of Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines and Vietnam, the United States and Japan can effectively neutralize aggressive behavior. The first step, however, is for the two countries to develop a coordinated strategy toward China—no easy task given the variant economic and geopolitical considerations within the alliance.

North Korea presents a serious but in some ways less complex threat, given that there is little or no daylight between U.S. and Japanese policymakers. North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January of 2016, followed by a ballistic missile launch, drew renewed attention to the possibility of a nuclear-armed missile scenario. The threat posed to the Japanese homeland as well as U.S. bases and territories in the region is clear. For years, the United States and Japan have cooperated closely on ballistic missile defense, and this cooperation should continue and deepen. In particular, the alliance should pursue a land-based missile defense system, like Aegis Ashore, that would provide high-altitude

interception capability without needing to be deployed like sea-based systems. Increasing consistent missile defense coverage of Japanese territory and U.S. military assets would provide a deterrent effect against a North Korean missile attack, as well. Another North Korean contingency for which the alliance should plan is a Korean Peninsula crisis scenario. In the event of active conflict between North and South Korea, U.S. military bases in Japan would provide critical logistical support. By invoking collective self-defense, Japan could provide additional basing support, logistics capabilities, and even operational defense of U.S. forces and bases. Though this activity would raise controversial history issues between the two neighbors, Japanese support would be critical to responding to an active conflict on the peninsula.

With any of these scenarios, the important next step will be bilateral cooperation from the strategic level to the operational level. The best way to operationalize the new Alliance Coordination Mechanism would be to coordinate bilateral strategies for these contingencies, develop integrated military planning for joint operations, and improve interoperability with joint exercises. The advantage of having a standing mechanism in place is that this coordination at all levels can occur during peacetime, rather than waiting for potential scenarios to turn into emergencies.

New Domains

Aside from regional contingency planning, there are opportunities to strengthen the alliance by expanding cooperation into new domains. The new bilateral defense guidelines identify cyber and outer space as two such potential areas for cooperation.

Much of the legal infrastructure for how to deal with cyber threats remains to be built, so the cyber domain provides fertile ground for increased cooperation. Once rules and norms are in place, promoting greater information sharing for cyber threats will help the United States and Japan protect critical infrastructure and security assets. As with U.S.-Japan military exercises, joint cybersecurity exercises will be an important step toward closer coordination. Fundamentally, however, the capability gap that exists between the two countries will be an obstacle to this cooperation. In this way, too, the United States can help with education, training, and professional exchanges to ensure that Japanese cybersecurity personnel are prepared to deal with mutual threats. The relatively new Cyber Defense Policy Working Group, established in 2013, should be the basis for cooperation in this domain.

The United States and Japan should also work together to improve situational awareness by sharing information in order to detect, characterize, and attribute threats in outer space. Many aspects of alliance security rely on assets in space—particularly when it comes to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities. Therefore, improving

the resiliency and reliability of space systems is an important area of cooperation. The new defense guidelines point to the use of space assets for early warning, positioning, navigation, and communication as crucial elements of alliance coordination.¹⁷ The alliance would benefit from the creation of a Japanese space agency within the Ministry of Defense to serve as a counterpart for the U.S. Air Force to coordinate on matters of national security, as opposed to civilian and scientific space cooperation.

Industrial Cooperation

The 2015 defense guidelines are the first to identify defense industrial cooperation as an opportunity for bilateral cooperation. A helpful step toward equipment and technology cooperation was Japan's recent creation of a centralized procurement office within the Ministry of Defense—the Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Agency. This new agency is responsible for Japan's involvement in international defense production and defense exports and will help facilitate industrial cooperation.

The continued modernization of U.S. and Japanese military capabilities is indispensable to meet regional challenges. In particular, investments in anti-submarine warfare and ballistic missile defense will prepare the alliance to deter and defeat likely threats. Pursuing such programs in a cooperative manner will help ensure interoperability of forces and seamless coordination.

While relaxing the Three Principles was an important step toward increasing Japan's role as a partner for defense industrial cooperation, the government must also develop a strategy to execute the new defense export policy in the broader regional context. Japan could play a crucial part in providing security assistance, equipment, and training to Southeast Asian countries, and help ensure that they are prepared to assist with neutralizing potential Chinese maritime aggression. Toward that end, the Government of Japan should consider creating an equivalent of the U.S. Defense Technology and Security Administration. By taking the lead on international defense transfers and coordination between the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, such an agency would help facilitate the government working with private industry to implement the new policy.

¹⁷ "The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation." Ministry of Defense of Japan. April 27, 2015. http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/shishin_20150427e.html.

Trilateral Cooperation

Finally, the United States and Japan should pursue trilateral cooperation as a means to strengthen regional security. Capitalizing on the recent agreement between Japan and South Korea over historical wartime issues, the time could finally be ripe for U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation. Despite longstanding and deep-seated political issues between the neighbors, the fact remains that the security of each country is intertwined with that of the other. One practical step toward closer cooperation would be to sign a Japan-South Korea General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). The two countries were close to such an agreement in 2012, before the announcement was derailed at the last minute by domestic opposition in South Korea, and negotiations have been stalled ever since. A GSOMIA between Japan and South Korea would allow not only for greater bilateral cooperation on matters of mutual security concern but also more efficient coordination with the United States in light of the North Korean threat.

Another important regional trilateral relationship to pursue is U.S.-Japan-Australia. Japan's recent bid for Australia's new submarine program had the potential to build deep, lasting ties between the two important allies. While it is regrettable from a trilateral perspective that the bid was not successful, future opportunities will be important for Japan to pursue. Transfer of these kinds of technology would help strengthen defense cooperation with like-minded countries in the region and lay the groundwork for future trilateral cooperation to address mutual security concerns. It would also be a major step forward for Japan's nascent defense export program. Relationships like these will be crucial to maintain peace and security in the Asia-Pacific, regardless of which contingencies play out in the coming years.

Remaining Challenges

While recent progress toward closer U.S.-Japan security cooperation has been remarkable, some challenges remain. Domestic fiscal problems in both countries pose the greatest threat to future security cooperation, with the growth of entitlement spending constraining defense spending. In the United States, political polarization makes reforming entitlements and repealing the budget caps seemingly impossible. In Japan, a rapidly aging population and low birth rate have combined to cause a dramatic spike in entitlement spending. These realities are squeezing both defense budgets at a crucial time in the history of the alliance.

Also, on both sides of the alliance, public opinion poses a real challenge, with widespread fears that one country will drag the other into war. In the United States, there is concern that security commitments to allies like Japan will lead to an entanglement with China. And in Japan there is a common worry that the new interpretation of collective self-defense will embroil Japan in America's next Iraq War-style adventure. Issues of U.S. force

presence and base structure also continue to plague Japanese public opinion about the alliance, particularly with regard to Okinawa.

Finally, despite broad agreement about regional threats in the Asia-Pacific, there exist some important differences between Washington and Tokyo when it comes to other geopolitical issues. Even with regular Russian incursions into its northern airspace, Japan does not seem to view Russia as the same revanchist threat as many U.S. leaders who see a similarity between Russian aggression in Crimea and Chinese assertiveness in the Senkaku Islands. Iran presents another source of divergence, as many in Japan see the nuclear deal as an opportunity for foreign investment and a new oil market for the energy-poor country. Some in Washington would, perhaps, wish that Tokyo took a harder line on Iran along international security lines. Prime Minister Abe's assurance to the legislature that the new security legislation would not be used to provide support for United States-led operations against the Islamic State demonstrates a difference of priorities, if not opinion, in the Middle East. When it comes down to it, however, the strength of the alliance will overcome these differences of broader geopolitical interests.

Conclusion

The recent reforms to Japan's security posture and steps toward a closer U.S.-Japan alliance are important but ultimately modest. These incremental changes have, together, helped to better prepare the alliance to meet the collective threats it is likely to face in the coming years, as Japan continues its gradual progress toward taking a more proactive role in its own defense as well as regional security. While some limitations and challenges remain, the strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance has proven its resilience and will undoubtedly continue to evolve. For now, it is implementing and operationalizing the new reforms and mechanisms that will truly transform the alliance and position it to continue its role as the cornerstone of peace, security, and stability in the Asia-Pacific.

Rachel Hoff researches defense budget and national security issues at the American Action Forum, a center-right think tank. She was one of the founding staff members of the Foreign Policy Initiative, where she served four years as Director of Government Relations & External Affairs. She previously worked as a Legislative Assistant for Congressman Mac Thornberry (R-TX) and as a Research Assistant at the American Enterprise Institute. Ms. Hoff was born and raised on military bases in Japan