Facilitating the US Pivot: A Japanese Perspective
By Noboru Yamaguchi

While America’s allies and partners in Asia have largely welcomed the US decision to shift the focus of its foreign policy toward this region, numerous questions remain about the degree of American commitment and what the pivot will really mean.

Noboru Yamaguchi examines some of the key questions and provides a Japanese perspective on the new US policy.

ON JANUARY 5, 2012, US President Barack Obama, flanked by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, unveiled a document, Sustaining Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense, that outlined a new strategic concept. It declared that the US “will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region,” because “US economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia.”

While this US rebalancing has been welcomed by allies and friends in the region, there remain questions and criticisms of various aspects of the policy, including whether it is feasible to rebalance at a time when US military spending is shrinking and the international system is evolving rapidly; whether rebalancing is consistent with the overall development policy of the Obama administration; and finally, whether there is a danger of provoking Beijing by creating the perception that rebalancing is an anti-China strategy.

This essay will provide a Japanese perspective on the US rebalancing by focusing on five key questions: 1) Is the US government really determined to rebalance toward Asia? 2) What does the rebalancing mean? 3) How much does the rebalancing matter to Japan’s defense policy? 4) How does the rebalancing relate to the rise of China? 5) Is there any possibility of a drastic shift away from a policy of rebalancing?

1) SIGNS OF US COMMITMENT
Japanese security specialists who welcome and support the idea of US rebalancing are convinced that the US is, indeed, determined to pursue this policy mainly because the current administration has been consistent in its emphasis on Asia since Obama took office in January 2009.

In February of that year, Obama hosted Japan’s then-Prime Minister Taro Asō as his first guest to the White House, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s first official overseas trip was to Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and China. A year later, in February 2010, the Defense Department released its Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR 2010), which parted ways with the previous QDR released in 2006. That review had focused on the global war on terror and paid less attention to specific regions, while QDR 2010 elaborated regional strategies with a particular focus on Asia. The report specifically stressed the importance of America’s alliances with Japan and South Korea for deterrence and defense in Northeast Asia. It also declared that the US would “transform Guam, the westernmost sovereign territory of the United States, into a hub for security activities in the region.”

Since last fall, the US has further elaborated on its Asia-Pacific policy. Clinton’s article, “America’s Pacific Century,” published in the November 2011 issue of Foreign Policy, was a comprehensive summary of the administration’s policy. The article begins with an assertion that “the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action.” Obama eloquently endorsed that point in speeches he delivered on a visit to Australia in November 2011, and the strategic document quoted earlier described in greater detail how the new strategy would be implemented. In short, America’s rebalancing toward Asia is not merely a short-term shift in policy priorities based on recent developments in the strategic environment. Rather, it is a policy reflecting the natural and immutable geo-strategic position in which the US now finds itself.

2) A RETURN TO NORMALCY?
To answer the second question regarding the meaning of the rebalancing, it is instructive to examine how the end of the global war on terror may allow the US to return to normalcy, or at least to unwind its current wartime posture. According to Japan’s Ministry of Defense, some 190,000 US service members — or 13 percent of the 1.4 million active-duty US military personnel — are currently deployed in Iraq, Afghanistan and surrounding countries. To maintain this highly mobilized posture in these two theaters for over 10 years, there have been more personnel at home preparing for the next deployment and recovering from the previous deployment than were deployed in the field. The US is now disengaging from sustained combat in the two theaters and is preparing to assume a post-global war on terror posture. If the rebalancing is not just a shift in regional focus, there are two points worth discussing. First, the US and its allies, including Japan, should start working hard to define the kind of strategic environment we are likely to face and to shape the kind of future we would like to see in the Asia-Pacific region. Second, the US will have to elaborate what kind of peace dividend will come from the end of the two wars and how that could enable the US to implement the rebalancing policy while simultaneously shrinking defense spending.

3) REVIEWING US-JAPAN DEFENSE CO-OPERATION
With respect to the third question, on the impact of the rebalancing on Japan’s security policy, it is worth beginning with the new National Defense
US rebalancing toward Asia is desirable and is likely to continue. How it is implemented, however, and to what extent, is not yet clear, but there is considerable room for US allies to ensure that the rebalancing takes place in a desirable way. Better alliance management between the US and allies such as Japan and South Korea could be a positive factor, as would closer cooperation among US allies.

Program Guidelines (NDPG 2010) that the Japanese government adopted in December 2010. The NDPG 2010 placed particular emphasis on defense and deterrence in the southwestern part of its territories through the flexible employment of defense capabilities. An excellent example of this could be seen last April when North Korea announced its plan to launch a long-range missile over Japan’s southwestern islands. The Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) deployed Aegis-class destroyers in the waters surrounding those islands and Patriot air/missile defense missile (PAC-3) batteries and chemical protection units on Okinawa, Miyako, and Ishigaki islands to deal with the possible dangers of an incoming missile or debris. Japan’s deployment of these forces has considerable significance for the US effort to enhance its ability to operate in an “anti-access/area-denial” (A2/AD) environment, because US forces in Okinawa and surrounding areas fall under the cover of Japan’s anti-ballistic missile system. JSDF’s territorial defense operations, such as mine countermeasures, anti-submarine warfare, air and missile defense, defense of remote islands and anti-ship warfare in the southwestern part of Japan could all serve to support US efforts to overcome an A2/AD environment if they are properly coordinated. The two governments should comprehensively scrutinize the new operational aspects of the US-Japan alliance listed above. In this context, it is encouraging that in August Japanese Defense Minister Satoshi Morimoto and US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta agreed to begin discussions on reviewing the current Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Co-operation, which were formulated in 1997. Such bilateral discussions will provide the two governments and their militaries with an excellent opportunity to think through various aspects of Japan-US defense co-operation in the future. Such a rethinking would be similar to what took place in the 1990s, when the two sides revised the first Guidelines of 1978 in an attempt to adjust the alliance to meet the needs of the post-Cold War security environment.

4) CONTENDING WITH CHINA’S RISE

On the fourth question, regarding China’s rise, it is a given that China’s emergence is the most important factor defining the future of the Asia-Pacific region, even if the question of how China’s rise will unfold remains open. If US rebalancing is regarded as an anti-China containment policy, it may have a negative impact on relations between China and the US as well as between China and its allies. In this context, US allies and partners in the region should assume that the US will continue to try its best to maintain a constructive and co-operative relationship with China. Clinton underscored this point in a speech at the US Naval Academy on April 10, saying, “We are not on the brink of a new Cold War in Asia.” She continued by stressing, “geopolitics today cannot afford to be a zero-sum game,” and added that “a thriving China is good for America and a thriving America is good for China, so long as we both thrive in a way that contributes to the regional and global good.”

The US seems to be doing its best to avoid a situation where it and its allies come to regard China as a hostile entity, through a mixture of engagement with and hedging against China. In this context, it is crucially important that Japan pursue three goals simultaneously: 1) to establish constructive relations with China through various means, including military-to-military exchanges; 2) to build and maintain modest but reliable law enforcement and defense capabilities to secure its territories, particularly in its southwestern maritime areas; and 3) to maintain a strong alliance with the US by implementing a wide range of policies, from strategic dialogue between the two governments, bilateral planning and joint exercises between the two militaries, to day-to-day efforts at alliance management on the ground, such as base realignment and host nation support.

5) WATCHING FOR WILDCARDS

Lastly, one cannot rule out the possibility that some wildcard could emerge that would cause another drastic change in US foreign policy priorities. As Clinton noted in her Foreign Policy article, “as the war in Iraq winds down and America begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the United States stands at a pivot point” in which ending the two wars is a precondition of the rebalancing toward Asia. If the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan were to deteriorate seriously, the US could well be forced to shift its focus away from the Pacific. Problems arising out of efforts to halt Iran’s nuclear program, as well as possible chaos caused by the Arab Spring, could also draw America’s attention back to the Middle East. These are additional areas where America’s friends and allies have to work extremely hard to keep the US emphasis on Asia’s security intact. In this context, counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, where Japan along with the US and its allies and friends have been working hard, will have greater implications in the larger picture of security in the Middle East. Similarly, Japan’s participation in UN peacekeeping operations in the Golan Heights and South Sudan have implications for security in East Asia as well as in the Middle East, because such efforts help to reduce the burden on the US in the Middle East and thus indirectly increase the possibility that it will remain focused on Asia. It is perhaps ironic that America’s allies in the Asia-Pacífic have to pay keen attention to out-of-area security problems in order to secure this region’s peace and stability through US political commitment to, and military presence in, Asia.

In conclusion, US rebalancing toward Asia is desirable and is likely to continue. How it is implemented, however, and to what extent, is not yet clear, but there is considerable room for US allies to ensure that the rebalancing takes place in a desirable way. Better alliance management between the US and allies such as Japan and South Korea could be a positive factor, as would closer cooperation among US allies.

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