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The Significance of Japan for US Security Interests

The significance of Japan for US security interests has become much clearer over the past ten years, with an increasing degree of interdependence in the global economy and in light of Japan's economic and industrial progress. It has almost become a truism that our relationship with this far-away island nation remains the cornerstone of US Asian policy. But it is an accurate description, nonetheless.

Japan's economic power, growth rate and potential, which have stamped Japan's trade mark on the entire world, have made Japan at one and the same time our principal overseas trading partner and our most formidable competitor. Moreover, as a leading trading partner of and large donor of economic assistance to most of the nations of East Asia, Japan played an exceptionally important role in contributing to that region's healthy economic development. This situation has made non-communist East Asia the world's fastest growing region with perhaps the best economic outlook for the future. Significant Japanese assistance to China and the Republic of Korea has been of significant value to the development and modernization of these nations. All in all, Japan has and will continue to have a profound effect on the long term stability and development of East Asia.
Japan's security contribution will likely remain limited to being capable, in conjunction with the United States, of providing for its own defense. Japan does not wish to acquire a power projection or an offensive capability. We of course are not seeking such a role for the Japanese. We hold the view that, while Japan must become capable of fulfilling the security risks it has set for itself, a limited military role is very much in the interests of the U.S., Japan and the other states in the region.

Nevertheless, if we are talking about the strategic significance of Japan, we cannot neglect to examine that nation's defense potential. In the event, however unlikely, of war we would have to rely on each other militarily. Japan, although less well-equipped than we would like, is a significant potential player. It possesses or will shortly possess:

-- A stable and effective government committed to shared democratic values and possessing skilled leadership and wide experience.

-- A unified, disciplined, highly-trained and educated society which would be a formidable asset in any major conflict.

-- A population of military age larger than any other major US ally in NATO or the Pacific.

-- The greatest industrial capability in the non-communist world except for the U.S.;
-- More ASW and escort type vessels in the Western Pacific than the US Navy;
-- More land-based air defense aircraft than the US or any of our Asian allies;
-- Significant sea and airlift capabilities;

Japan's geographic position off the Asian mainland protects it from direct land invasion and permits the surveillance and control of much of the region's air and sea lines of communication. Our bases in Japan enable us to project power, if necessary, and to maintain close scrutiny of the entire Northeast Asia region. Up to now, logistical support provided to our forces in Japan has allowed us to maintain a credible deterrent in this part of the world with fewer resources than if we were forced to seek these on US soil.

In addition to Japan's industrial power, its defense potential, geographic position and cooperative security relationship with us, I must mention another factor, namely Japan's influence and prestige throughout Asia and, indeed, the entire world. The Japanese enjoy close relationships with China, other nations on the Asian mainland and with ASEAN. Often they are able to achieve mutually beneficial political, economic, cultural or security objectives which might not lend themselves to a direct approach by the US or its other allies. In the United Nations also, Japan usually strives for objectives which are widely shared by
the US and its other allies. Such influence, is an important factor in the maintenance of Asian stability.

It is, I believe, fair to say that almost none of the major US objectives in Asia would be possible to achieve without the support or acquiescence of Japan. If Asia is extremely important to us now it is destined to become even more so in the future. We have a natural, important connection with this part of the world. Our need for overseas resources and markets for our goods dictates long-term involvement, while our concept of forward defense makes it imperative that the US have the capability of defending its Asian allies to deter conflict as far from our own shores as possible. Thus our interest and involvement in Asia are by no means unselfish; our own well-being and security are clearly related to those of our friends on the Western side of the Pacific.

The key question for U.S. Pacific security interests now is the outlook for maintaining the health of the US-Japan relationship in light of our economic and defense problems. We must find a solution to the trade issue which avoids a mutually debilitating trade war while affording reciprocal and equitable access to each other’s markets. In defense, we will have to find a way to have Japan take the limited steps in the security area which we have been urging, steps which are essential to preserving the credibility and deterrent value of our alliance and which, incidentally, are essential to avoid Congressional pressures to lessen our defense commitment to Japan or otherwise weaken our security relationship.
I am confident that the issue can be managed effectively if there is full appreciation on the part of the US that our security relationship with Japan and with Asia is not a one-way street and makes a major contribution to our own security. Japan, for its part, must become capable of fully carrying out the defense role it has set for itself and which we fully support. With good sense on both sides, I look forward to moving ahead with Japan as a full security partner.