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JAPAN-US SECURITY CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE AT TOKYO FROM 'QUIET TRANSFORMATION' TO 'NOTEWORTHY INSTITUTIONALIZATION' OF THE ALLIANCE

Ryo Sahashi

The US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (SCC), the so-called "2+2" meeting between foreign and defense cabinet-level officials, was convened on October 3rd. It was the first time for both the US Secretaries of State and Defense to participate in this format in Tokyo. In my previous analysis on the joint 2+2 statement from 2011, I argue that a set of twenty-four common security objectives is evidence of a 'quiet transformation of the alliance.'

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By contrast, the joint statement from this meeting, entitled 'Toward a More Robust Alliance and Greater Shared Responsibilities,' could be seen as a call for 'noteworthy institutionalization' of the alliance.

The statement appeals to an international audience. From the opening paragraph, it claims 'the SCC reconfirmed our Alliance's commitment to the security of Japan through the full range of US military capabilities, including nuclear and conventional.' In its list of 'persistent and emerging threats to peace and security,' North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and humanitarian concerns are ranked at the top, followed by maritime security, space and cyber security, proliferation and disasters.

This paragraph continues, 'the Ministers continue to encourage China to play a responsible and constructive role in regional stability and prosperity, to adhere to international norms of behavior, as well as to improve openness and transparency in its military modernization with its rapid expanding military investments.' Surely, this is just a carbon copy of the SCC statement in 2011 on China. This sentence is obscure in its diplomatic wording, and the substantive agreements on the joint statement on China are not mentioned even once. However, it is significant that both governments reaffirm this sentence today, because Japanese security concerns has heightened due to the repeated intrusion of official Chinese ships and aerial vehicles into Japanese territory. Additionally, Secretary Kerry reiterated in remarks to the press the US government's position on the Senkaku Islands of 'recognizing Japanese administration over those islands.'

The second appealing aspect of the joint statement is related to the US attitude toward Japan's evolving security posture. The US 'welcomed' the recent efforts of Japan on establishing a National Security Council with its first documentation of a National Security Strategy, on making proactive contributions to global and Asian security, on increasing its defense budget and reviewing the National Defense Program Guidelines and, most importantly, on 'the matter of exercising the right of collective self-defense.' This seems to have had a tremendous psychological impact on the South Korean government and policy circles. Clearly, policymakers inside and outside the US government have

shared concerns about the recent political difficulties between its Northeast Asian allies. It is also fair to say that the US is not taking any sides on issues of historical perception. However, it is crucial that the US welcome the enhancement of Japan's security posture and regards it within the broader context of a 'more balanced and effective' partnership in its Asian strategy.

The joint statement is politically appealing, but it also shows agreement on various aspects of the alliance's steady institutionalization. Firstly, the governments agree to review their Guidelines of Defense Cooperation by the end of 2014. The 1997 Guidelines expanded Japan's roles in "situations in areas surrounding Japan" (SIASJ), notably in rear-area support for US Forces' activities. The prolonged "grey zone" challenges to Japan's national interests that have the potential to escalate have forced the two governments to prepare for cooperation beyond rear-area support. According to the joint statement, the coming guideline would aim for 'seamless bilateral cooperation in all situations' and 'appropriate role sharing of bilateral defense cooperation based on the enhancement of mutual capabilities.'

The two governments also agree on the enhancement of defense policy institutionalization by confirming their intention to introduce an X-band radar system in the North Kyoto area for a missile defense system, welcoming the establishment of a policy working group on cyber defense and dialogue on space, and promising steps enabling the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency to provide space situational awareness information to the US government. Notably, they approve 'strengthening bilateral whole-of-government mechanisms of peacetime and crisis coordination and improving contingency access by US forces and the Self-Defense Forces to facilities in Japan.' The expansion of the scope of bilateral coordination mechanisms is essential and the lessons from the Great Japan Earthquake and Operation Tomodachi should be reflected to this end.

The joint statement has a chapter on regional engagement, listing the items for the alliance to promote for increasing their presence in the Asia-Pacific. The two governments commit to capacity building for Southeast Asian nations to 'develop their own defense and law enforcement,' especially for maritime

security and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, and welcome Japan's use of developmental aid to build up coast guard capacity. They also confirm their intention for trilateral and multilateral approaches to building regional security architecture. Alliance cooperation on regional engagement has increased in importance for sharing burdens and maintaining the regional order. To underpin the US' commitment to the region, Japan will take on roles supporting the making of an inclusive and independent region in the Asia-Pacific.

The realignment of US Forces in Japan and information security has yet to be fully implemented, and good-faith commitments from both governments are necessary. Debate on the capability to strike strategic bases would cause more tension between the two governments but, should that happen, it would not signify less trust in extended deterrence or mean that Japan's purpose is to gain a free hand from America. Rather, the discussion is linked to strengthening our deterrence capabilities as an alliance.

To conclude, the recent joint statement confirms the assumption that the alliance between Tokyo and Washington is politically stable and growing in substance since the alliance is gaining more strategic meaning for the US' Asia policy in flux. When appreciating the outcome of the SCC, we do not need to worry too much about the sustainability of the US rebalancing toward Asia, despite the absence of its president from regional summit meetings this fall. Shared visions and values are secured in the alliance format. 

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