

Japan's Uneasy Citizens and the U.S.–Japan Alliance

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S U M M A R Y Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. and Japanese policymakers have successfully reaffirmed the U.S.–Japan security alliance. Yet, even as they have done so, a series of events has revealed a deeper ambivalence in Japan about the terms of the alliance. These events began with the 1995 rape of a school girl in Okinawa by U.S. servicemen, focusing attention on the social costs to residents of hosting U.S. forces. In 1999 came North Korea's launch of a missile over Japan, raising doubts among many Japanese about their alliance partner's ability to protect them. Most recently, the outcome of the 2001 sinking of the *Ehime Maru* training ship by a U.S. nuclear sub seemed to many to sacrifice Japanese citizens' interests to those of the U.S. military. Taken independently, these developments may seem temporary setbacks to policymakers, but together they suggest that there is increasing impatience among Japan's citizens with the way the alliance is managed. This disconnect between the public and policymakers could, if untended, have serious implications for the U.S.–Japan alliance.

Japan's citizens are demanding something new from their politicians, and this has important implications for the U.S.–Japan alliance

The end of the Cold War meant change at the highest levels of the U.S.–Japan alliance, but this past decade has also revealed some intriguing changes in the Japanese public's attitudes toward Japan's security policies. During the Cold War, it was commonplace to hear United States and Japanese bureaucrats bemoaning the “pacifist” Japanese public and criticizing the lack of interest by Japan's politicians in issues related to security. Today, Japan's politicians openly debate revising the postwar constitution, and it is accepted that the Japanese military will plan for a regional security crisis—or even war. This change is a result of several factors. Perhaps the most important was the perception in the first half of the 1990s that the world was changing rapidly, creating a new sense of urgency for Japan to make critical decisions about its foreign and security policy. The Gulf War, the nuclear proliferation crisis on the Korean peninsula, and the confrontation between United States and Chinese forces in the Taiwan Straits all called for Japanese assessment and response. Moreover, there were increasing pressures from the United States, and less visibly from others around the world, for Japan to contribute to global security more actively.

Along with these new international challenges for Japan is a set of domestic dilemmas that have prompted a vigorous debate within Japan over the nation's future. Japan's citizens are demanding something new from their politicians, and this has important implications for the U.S.–Japan security relationship. The election of Junichiro Koizumi as head of the Liberal Democratic Party in April 2001 and his unprecedented 85 percent support rating early in his tenure as prime minister is an expression of the public's hope for strong leadership in the face of an array of problems.

A Post-Cold War Security Agenda for Japan

The Japanese public began to reconsider their government's approach to security policymaking long before Koizumi arrived in office. Debates on subjects long considered “taboo”—revising the constitution, sending the Self Defense Forces (SDF) overseas, acting jointly with U.S. forces in the Asia Pacific region—have for some time been debated on TV talk

shows and even in classrooms. International events since the end of the Cold War have put significant policy changes on the national agenda, and the Japanese government is being asked to justify publicly its security policy choices. There is a growing gap between policymakers and the public in Japan over issues related to the U.S.–Japan alliance. But today this gap is less about divergent perceptions of what kind of security policy Japan needs than over questions of transparency and accountability when issues involving the alliance arise.

Since the end of the Cold War, policymakers in the United States and Japan have reconfirmed, and even redefined, the U.S.–Japan security alliance and now have fewer differences over its goals.ⁱ In the mid-1990s, tensions on the Korean peninsula, and later between Beijing and Taiwan, suggested that the old Cold War mechanisms for security cooperation between Washington and Tokyo were inadequate to the more fluid, and less predictable, Asia Pacific security environment. Once policymakers jointly crafted a new set of guidelines for U.S.–Japan Defense Cooperation, the Japanese government introduced a legislative package that expanded the framework for U.S.–Japan security cooperation. The ensuing Diet deliberations revealed a consensus among Japan's politicians in almost all political parties that national security interests were served by a more active role in regional security problems.

This new acceptance of Japan's responsibility for regional security seems to be shared by the Japanese public. A recent *Yomiuri Shimbun*/Gallup poll confirmed that the Japanese public now believes that the U.S.–Japan alliance contributes to regional stability.ⁱⁱ

And yet, even as the two governments have sought to shape a new bilateral security agenda that accommodates changes in the region, a series of events has revealed a deeper ambivalence in Japan about the terms of the alliance. This, too, is captured in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*/Gallup poll. When asked if they trusted the United States, 44.5 percent of the Japanese respondents answered positively, while 41.8 percent answered negatively—a disturbing figure given the degree of Japan's dependence on the United States for its national security. Even more revealing,

however, was the attitude toward the U.S. military bases in Japan, which are the underpinning of U.S. strategic capabilities in the region: 52.5 percent of respondents wanted fewer U.S. forces in Japan, while 14 percent wanted them completely removed.

Is popular support in Japan waning for the alliance at precisely the moment when policymakers are revising and expanding the aims of their security cooperation? Polling data has been one of the only tools used by policymakers to gauge the shifting opinions of Japan's public. Yet polls cannot fully reveal the factors that shape understanding of national policy. A more careful look at the dynamics of Japan's public debate over its security policy is called for.

Taking a Citizen's Perspective

Several episodes of public contention relating to Japan's security provisions help give texture to the *Yomiuri Shimbun*/Gallup poll findings. The first is the extended debate over the U.S. bases in Okinawa. Outrage within Okinawa Prefecture over the 1995 rape of a school girl by U.S. military personnel prompted an effort by then-Governor Ota Masahide to renegotiate the terms of the U.S. military presence there as well as a review by Japanese and U.S. government officials of the existing bases. Second, North Korea's 1999 launch over Japan of its *Taepodong* missile shocked the Japanese public and raised questions about whether or not the U.S.–Japan alliance truly protected Japan from newly emerging regional threats. The public scare led to calls for greater attention to Japan's own defense capability by some political leaders and created strains in the relationship between Tokyo, Washington, and Seoul over their approach to North Korea. Third, the sinking of the *Ehime Maru* by a U.S. nuclear submarine off the coast of Hawaii, and the resulting loss of Japanese lives, occasioned another round of questioning about just how responsive U.S. military authorities are to the concerns of Japan's citizens. Taken independently, these incidents may seem temporary setbacks to policymakers, but together they suggest that there is a growing impatience with the way the alliance is managed.

Okinawans feel Tokyo has turned a blind eye to the social problems caused by U.S. forces there

The U.S. bases in Okinawa. The 1995 rape of a 12-year-old girl by U.S. servicemen focused attention on the social costs to local residents of hosting U.S. forces in Japan, and it caused a public debate in Japan that pitted national security objectives against the representative function of government. Within weeks of the rape, 85,000 Okinawans gathered in an “island-wide” protest against the U.S. bases, calling for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from the island.

The protest in Okinawa took Tokyo—and Washington—by surprise. Local anti-base demonstrations were seen by most policymakers as a thing of the past. U.S. bases attracted considerable citizen antipathy in the early decades of the Cold War when the U.S. military was concentrated in the vicinity of the Tokyo metropolitan area. But since the 1970s, the bulk of U.S. forces—75 percent, in fact—have remained on the small island of Okinawa. Outrage in Okinawa resulted not only from the sense that Tokyo had turned a blind eye to the social problems caused by the concentration of U.S. forces there; it was also felt that Tokyo had paid even less attention to the impact of the U.S. bases in Okinawa than it had to their impact in other Japanese communities.

As the outcry over the rape grew in intensity, security policymakers in Tokyo and Washington announced in November 1995 the creation of a Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) to specifically address concerns raised by local government about the U.S. military presence. In subsequent meetings, the two governments discussed the treatment of U.S. military personnel suspected of a major crime, the reduction of land area occupied by the U.S. military in Japan, and public safety issues related to live-fire exercises and other training in Okinawa. Less than a year later, Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro and U.S. Ambassador Walter Mondale jointly announced that the two governments had agreed to return one of the most problematic U.S. military bases on the island, MCAS Futenma.

But this high-level U.S.–Japan attention did not solve the problem. Okinawa's Governor Ota refused to cooperate in the national government's land expropriation procedures for U.S. bases. The Japanese government then took him to court, arguing that under

Japan's Local Autonomy Law he was required to participate. Ota lost the first round in the High Court, but appealed to Japan's Supreme Court. In doing so, he framed his actions within broader currents of reform within Japanese politics. In contrast to past base protest efforts, Ota's legal team argued that in the case of U.S. bases, locally elected leaders were being asked to participate in a policy that ultimately threatened their constituents' welfare.ⁱⁱⁱ

Though this challenge was dismissed by the Supreme Court, the attention of the Japanese public had been captured. Within Okinawa, Ota was applauded for giving voice to the views of all Okinawans. As local citizens groups organized a prefectural referendum on the base issue, the governor articulated his prefecture's position to the rest of Japan, drawing on powerful imagery from both American and Japanese political experience to position his battle within debates over citizen rights and the need for greater citizen representation in Japan.

Though other parts of Japan watched Okinawa's efforts to challenge Tokyo with fascination, there was no broad national support of the arguments put forward nor, ultimately, sufficient support in Okinawa. Ota ran for reelection in 1998, but was defeated by a conservative candidate who argued for a more conciliatory policy toward Tokyo. Many analysts saw Ota's defeat as a sign that Okinawa's residents shared the national consensus on the need for the bases. But within a few years, it became clear that public sensitivity to the bases remained high, despite the best efforts of the new governor, Keiichi Inamine, to negotiate a compromise with Tokyo. By early 2001, a series of new crimes and "incidents" were in the headlines of local and national news, forcing Inamine to publicly castigate the U.S. military for its inability to stem criminal behavior by its personnel. The prefectural assembly, now in conservative majority, also passed a resolution demanding the removal of the U.S. Marine Corps from the island. A leaked e-mail message from the senior U.S. Marine general on the island, Earl Hailston, referring to Okinawa's governor and other political leaders as "nuts" and "a bunch of wimps," added fuel to the fire. Inamine formally requested that the Japanese government revise the Status of Forces

Agreement (SOFA) with the United States. In June 2001, another alleged rape case brought the issue to a head, and the need to reconsider SOFA was taken up in the Diet and in bilateral talks with U.S. officials.

Though base issues have long been problematic in Japan and elsewhere, at issue today is not whether the alliance should exist. Indeed, these clashes between local citizens and the U.S. military are not about the high politics of whether Japan's alliance with the United States is justified.

The frustration among local residents in Okinawa stems from a lack of access to the policymaking process regarding the bases. The SOFA gives the U.S. military a certain degree of protection from local laws and political practice, a modern day version of extra-territoriality. In the face of constituent outcry, local officials must appeal up the ladder of Japan's political process, ultimately to Japan's foreign minister, to address these complaints in talks with the U.S. government. While the economic subsidies to localities make bases an integral part of local economic development planning, the public is not privy to the terms and conditions of these subsidies. Local officials are stymied, therefore, when trouble occurs; economic assistance can evaporate if complaints are too loud, and there is no direct mechanism for coping with the U.S. military in their communities.

The result of this complex political relationship is that frustrations build at the level of the local community, and yet local officials have little leverage on the actions of U.S. personnel. Ultimately, the national government is seen as the source of the problem, since it advocates the need for these foreign troops to begin with. The lack of any clear improvement in the behavior of U.S. forces only fuels citizen frustration and puts further strain on an already tenuous process of political representation.

Thus, the current political questions raised by repeated criminal acts by U.S. forces are not about the alliance but are rather about the Japanese government's ability to articulate and enforce citizen interests.

The 1998 *Taepondong* missile launch. Today, debate in the Diet and in the public media reflects a wide-

Frustrations build at the local level and yet local officials have little leverage on the policymaking process

Since the missile launch, Japanese citizens have been more informed about and more willing to scrutinize security policy

spread concern with the long-term possibility that China will emerge as a threat to Japan and a consensus that North Korea is Japan's largest immediate problem. It is evident that the public is more informed on security issues and more willing to scrutinize the effectiveness of Japan's security policy.

This change in public attitudes became obvious when North Korea launched its *Taepodong* missile over Japan in the summer of 1998. An intense sense of threat infused the public reaction, and while the Japanese and U.S. security policy community sought to coordinate their responses, the media was full of articles questioning whether Japan's government was adequately prepared to cope with this new unsettling event.

U.S. and Japanese policymakers were unaccustomed to thinking about how to reassure the Japanese public in cases such as this. It was left to a mid-level Japanese Defense Agency bureaucrat to offer a brief report. Meanwhile, intense and escalating public posturing from a variety of Diet members only exacerbated the impression that the government was confused and ill-prepared for the "crisis." News reports and commentaries focused on whether or not the United States was actually providing Japan with information, and when U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright downplayed the significance of the missile launch, Japanese TV commentators interpreted it as a lack of U.S. concern for Japan's security, fueling open debate over whether the United States would protect Japan from this "threat."

Days later the Japanese and U.S. governments publicly noted that they shared a common understanding of what had happened, and that there had been no real threat to Japan. But many of Japan's politicians were reluctant to dismiss what they saw as a clear North Korean test of their resolve. Moreover, the impression that the United States had withheld information from Japan persisted. Public threat perception in Japan, inflated and out of sync with Japan's own security experts, turned immediately into doubts about the efficacy of the U.S.–Japan alliance.

Perhaps for the first time, the Japanese public seemed more concerned about Japan's security provisions than did its government. For much of the

half-century since the end of World War II, the public has been reticent to imagine the circumstances in which their own security might be threatened. Government officials often pointed out the postwar "pacifism" in Japan, including the "nuclear allergy," when U.S. policymakers argued for greater defense efforts. But this notion that the Japanese public was unresponsive to events that might endanger their security today seems outdated and hides a more significant issue: by attributing public criticism of the U.S.–Japan alliance or of efforts to increase Japan's military capability solely to a public lack of interest in security matters, analysts have failed to consider the possibility that the Japanese public may perceive threat differently than policymakers.

The *Taepodong* missile launch hit a nerve in Japan and in the weeks that followed Japan's politicians quickly seized the opportunity to remove some restrictions on Japan's defense preparedness. Most obvious was a push for greater self-reliance in intelligence gathering capabilities by Japan's military. Tokyo's handling of North Korean "suspicious" vessels operating off Japan's west coast has also become more pronounced. In a highly publicized case, a Maritime Self Defense Force destroyer was sent to protect Japan's coast from North Korean fishing boats suspected of spying. For the first time, the MSDF was told it should fire warning shots at the ships, a clear signal of a changing attitude toward use of the SDF. Moreover, the missile launch also prompted political leaders to prepare for other kinds of North Korean activities. The SDF is now seeking authority to use force against suspected guerrilla terrorists off of Japan's coasts, again making reference to "suspicious" activities along Japan's coast.

Fundamental to the Japanese public's assessment of the U.S.–Japan alliance will be the question of whether or not the United States is sensitive and responsive to concerns about Japan's security. This is not a new issue in alliance management, but the circumstances facing the United States and Japan today are quite different than in the past. The complex relationship between the two Koreas and the United States, and between the two Koreas and Japan, now make for some more subtle dynamics in the

U.S.–Japan relationship. Many in Japan perceived the North Korean missile test as an affront to Japanese sovereignty, and the reaction to the *Taepodong* clearly reveals more complex sentiments toward Pyongyang. But key to this episode is the fact that the Japanese public today is more readily influenced by international tensions and more sensitive to the ways in which their government prepares to cope with potential threats.

The sinking of the *Ehime Maru*. The relationship between the United States and Japan is far broader than simply a government-to-government dialogue over security goals and concerns. The United States looms large in the public consciousness in Japan, and the interactions of individual Japanese with Americans are so far reaching that it is impossible to fully anticipate how they might affect the security relationship. Policymakers have the capacity to address citizen concerns over the bases and, of course, they are expected to work together to cope with external security threats. But there are also ways in which Tokyo and Washington are now being evaluated by Japan's citizens that are new, and far less predictable.

Nowhere was this new dimension of the relationship better revealed than by the *USS Greenville's* sinking of a fisheries training ship off the coast of Hawaii. On February 9, 2001, a Japanese training ship carrying high school fisheries students was struck by a U.S. nuclear submarine, the *USS Greenville*, as it made a rapid ascent. The sub's crew stood by in high seas as the U.S. Coast Guard undertook rescue efforts. Twenty-six Japanese were rescued, while 9—including four high school students—were never found.

The U.S. government quickly sought to assure the Japanese government that it would do all it could for the victims and their families. The Bush administration was barely in office, but at the highest levels of the government phone calls were made to Japanese government officials. The next day, during a speech in Georgia, President Bush called for a moment of silence for those lost at sea. Soon after, the president phoned Japan's prime minister, offering his apology and conveying his remorse at the accident.

From the beginning, the Japanese public saw the

U.S. rescue effort—and the U.S. Navy in particular—as being unresponsive to their concerns. There was widespread frustration at the lack of information about what went on inside the *USS Greenville*, and tensions increased when it became clear that the submarine had been out on a VIP tour. When the U.S. Coast Guard attempted to call off the search-and-rescue effort more than a week later, the Japanese government successfully pressed them to revise their decision.

But the most striking clash of cultures erupted over the question of an apology. In a press conference held in Hawaii, the families of the missing called for an apology from the commander of the submarine, Scott Waddle. But the submarine's commanding officer remained out of the public eye as the U.S. Navy sought to organize an investigation into the events that led up to the fatal accident. Instead, a senior Navy officer, Admiral Thomas Fallon, was sent from Washington, D.C., to Japan to apologize to the Japanese government and to the families of the victims.

In contrast to the U.S. press coverage of the high-level political attention given to the accident in the United States, the Japanese press and public opinion viewed the entire incident through the eyes of the victim's agonized and frustrated families. Some comfort came from Admiral Fallon's visit, the subsequent Court of Inquiry (including the participation of a Japanese admiral), and the U.S. government's positive response to the Japanese government's request that the *Ehime Maru* be raised to the surface for additional recovery efforts. But when the Court of Inquiry announced that Commander Waddle would receive not a court martial but, rather, an administrative punishment, the sense was that the Navy had glossed the matter. The decision was leaked to the U.S. press days in advance of the announcement, and that seemed further evidence that the Navy was protecting its own reputation at the expense of justice for the families. The families remain unconvinced of the result of the Court of Inquiry. When the announcement of Commander Waddle's "admiral's mast" was reported, a number of relatives of the victims spoke openly in the Japanese press of their outrage. Moreover, several families decided to forgo negotiations

The public today is more readily influenced by international tensions and more sensitive to the ways in which their government prepares to cope

with the U.S. Navy over compensation and instead pursue legal action in U.S. courts in an attempt to get more information on the circumstances that led to the accident.

The Japanese government announced that it was satisfied that the United States had accepted responsibility for the accident. The governor of Ehime Prefecture assumed the role of mediator between the U.S. government officials and the families. The official dialogue between Japan and the United States turned to compensation for the victims' families, and to the task of raising the ship.

The political consequences of the *Ehime Maru* accident remain to be seen. One of the immediate consequences was to force a reconsideration of whether U.S. naval operations in and around Japan are safe. In the aftermath of the accident, the U.S. Navy cancelled a scheduled visit to the civilian port of Otaru in Hokkaido. Weeks later, when a U.S. Navy nuclear sub entered Sasebo harbor without notifying local authorities, residents were furious and the local mayor suggested that the U.S. Navy go elsewhere. Two outcomes of the *Ehime Maru* tragedy are particularly noteworthy. First, the two governments have been forced to give a higher level of attention to how the Japanese public perceives the bilateral relationship; moreover, there is increasing pressure on U.S. officials to adequately address the interests and sentiments of Japan's citizens. Second, questions about the U.S. military and its conflict with the interests of Japan's citizens were raised yet again.

Japan's Citizens and America's Military

These new episodes signal that the engagement of the Japanese public in security policy is motivated by somewhat different concerns than in the past. The most familiar complaints are those that focus on the U.S. military presence. The Okinawa base protest echoed local frustrations experienced during the Cold War. But there is a new dimension to the base issue. Despite broad public acknowledgment that the alliance is necessary to Japan, the strategic imperative of the base concentration on Okinawa is not convincing among the public. Moreover, recent debates over the

Okinawa bases are varied, and complaints can no longer be attributed to the conservative or progressive stance of local leaders.

Citizen attitudes toward the alliance today are more complex. They are also more intimately linked with public frustration in Japan about the ability of political leaders to come up with workable solutions to policy problems. The excitement and fervor surrounding Japan's new prime minister in fact reflects this frustration. Japan's citizens are hoping for accountability and transparency in public policymaking, and Koizumi's straight-talking style has struck a chord. There are other new political leaders in Japan who share this populist appeal but whose views on the alliance are controversial, among them Tokyo's outspoken governor, Shintaru Ishihara, and Japan's first female foreign minister, Makiko Tanaka. It is not clear that this new wave of public enthusiasm for Japan's current leadership will continue, nor is it clear what implications it will have for the kinds of policies Japan pursues.

But it is clear that Japan's citizens are uneasy with the alliance in its new post-Cold War setting. In particular, the relationship between the Japanese public and the U.S. military seems strained and contentious. These events have also led to greater scrutiny of the alliance and the mechanisms developed for U.S.–Japan security cooperation, and have engendered some rethinking of the privileges provided to the U.S. military.

The security architecture of Japan's Cold War alliance with the United States created a new dynamic between the citizens of Japan and their government. The presence of U.S. military forces in Japan created tensions that could not be immediately resolved by citizen activism. Rather, a more complex and ultimately frustrating process of lobbying Japan's national government to ask that it use its "good offices" to argue its citizens interests became the norm when citizens sought to influence the U.S. military. Today, now that the Cold War is over, there is broad public support for the U.S.–Japan alliance in Japan. But there is a growing disconnect between the public and policymakers in Japan that, if untended, could have serious implications for the U.S.–Japan alliance.

The engagement of the Japanese public in security policy is motivated by different concerns than in the past

Notes

ⁱ Iriye, Akira and Robert A. Wampler, eds. 2001. *Partnership: The United States and Japan, 1951–2001*. New York: Kodansha International.

ⁱⁱ When asked if the U.S.–Japan security treaty contributed to the security of the Asia Pacific region, 62.1 percent answered

positively, while only 23.6 percent answered negatively. *Yomiuri Shimbun*/Gallup Survey conducted December 22–25, 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Smith, Sheila. 2000. “Challenging National Authority: The U.S. Bases in Okinawa,” in Sheila A. Smith, ed., *Local Voices, National Issues: The Impact of Local Initiative in Japanese Policy-making*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

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