The New Shape of Asian Security

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TOKYO—Today, the U.S.-Japanese strategic partnership is poised on the brink of a major evolution.

Over the past several years, President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi presided over a significant expansion of bilateral ties, manifested through greater cooperation in Afghanistan and Iraq, and on counterproliferation matters. Since taking office in September 2006, Koizumi's successor, Shinzo Abe, has taken great pains to reinforce and strengthen these bonds. But he has also begun to think bigger, taking the tentative first steps toward extending the bilateral strategic partnership between the U.S. and Japan to include Australia and India as well.

These changes are a reflection of the new international security environment. The common threat once posed by the Soviet Union is long gone. Instead, the growing nuclear and missile menace of North Korea and China's economic and military rise have grown to dominate Asian security—and the ties between Japan and the United States. Since September 11, 2001, the global war on terror has also become a defining influence on bilateral relations.

The February 2005 meeting of the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee, also known as the "2+2," served to confirm these changes, redefining the bilateral partnership as a "global" alliance with a number of common strategic objectives. At the broadest level, these include the promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law; nonproliferation and counterterrorism; support for Japan's permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council; and the security of global energy supply. Regionally, meanwhile, both countries have committed to strengthening stability in the Asian-Pacific, supporting the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula, confronting North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile threats, a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue, greater transparency in China's military modernization, and the normalization of Japanese-Russian relations, among others.

The subsequent "2+2" meeting, held later the same year, further solidified the transformation taking place in U.S.-Japanese relations, outlining the sharing of roles, missions and capabilities (RMCs) between the U.S. military and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. It also provided a framework for possible multilateral cooperation between the Japan-U.S. alliance and other partners. Then, in May 2006, another "2+2" put forward a road map for dealing with the thorny issue of restructuring U.S. bases in Japan to better tackle the task of maintaining regional deterrence while reducing the burden on Japanese locals.

Other regional states are beginning to take notice. Australia, for one, has shown a growing interest in joining the fold. The latest "2+2" meeting took place in May 2007, on the heels of a joint security declaration signed by Mr. Abe and

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Australian Prime Minister John Howard. That agreement focused on expanding bilateral cooperation in a range of security fields, including counterterrorism, maritime security, and intelligence. And already, Japan and Australia have held *their* first "2+2" meeting, focusing on North Korea's nuclear and missile threat and trilateral security cooperation among the U.S., Japan and Australia. Now, expectations of Canberra's involvement in U.S.-led regional missile defense efforts are growing. The trend is clear; what was once solely a bilateral affair is increasingly becoming a mechanism for trilateral security cooperation among Japan, Australia, and the U.S.

A further expansion could also be on the horizon. The most recent, May 2007, "2+2" not only served to reaffirm the common strategic objectives between Washington and Tokyo, but also to highlight the importance of security cooperation with two other major global players: India and NATO. Although a direct linkage between the Japan-U.S. alliance and NATO is not likely anytime soon, a partnership with India may be more imminent; the three countries already have carried out a joint naval exercise, and more military cooperation is expected.

It remains to be seen if both Australia and India simultaneously establish direct military links to the Japan-U.S. alliance, realizing Mr. Abe's idea of cooperation among maritime democracies. At the very least, however, it is becoming clear that the bilateral bonds between Washington and Tokyo are becoming the basis for multilateral strategic dialogue among the liberal democracies of Asia.

To be sure, future domestic politics and differences in policy between the two countries could still constrain the pace and scope of alliance cooperation. But Washington and Tokyo should bank on regional realities' sustaining their partnership for the foreseeable future.