

## A Continuum of Change

---

Beyond the direct effects on the United States itself, among the most significant global effects of the September 11 terrorist attacks are the realignment of today's major powers and the transformed military posture of Japan. The changed perception of threat, from Soviet-led international communism to vaguely defined transnational terrorism, precipitated the realignment of powers on the stage of global and regional politics. Arch-enemies during the Cold War, Russia and China have moved closer to the United States because antiterrorism also tops their own domestic agendas. The impact on the Indo-Pakistani rivalry and the two countries' respective relations with the United States have been more complex in view of their geographical proximity to formerly Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Nevertheless, both countries have succeeded in promoting their usefulness for the international coalition to fight terrorism.

Ironically, it was Europe, the center stage of Cold War strategy, that was most dramatically affected by the structural transformation after the September 11 attacks. NATO's rationale was altered substantially when the Soviet empire collapsed and was delivered an additional blow by the emergence of a new type of transnational threat. The transatlantic alliance is not dead but clearly is severely strained and groping to find relevancy for the new security agenda.

Although nations in Asia and the Pacific region were affected, they were structurally changed less dramatically than the transatlantic region after September 11. The fact that the Soviet Union occupied a less prominent place in Asia and the Pacific region during the Cold War, coupled with most Asian nations' preoccupation with a long-term agenda of modernization,

---

Akio Watanabe is president of the Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS) in Tokyo.

---

© 2004 by The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
*The Washington Quarterly* • 27:4 pp. 137–146.

helped maintain a sense of continuity even after the demise of the Soviet threat. Al Qaeda's attacks did not cause as drastic a blow to the rationale of the transpacific alliance as compared to the transatlantic alliance. The continued presence of such regional issues as the uncertain futures of the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Strait continues to justify the U.S.-Japanese alliance. Robust solidarity between the two largest economies in the world,

**The transatlantic alliance is not dead but clearly is strained severely.**

---

the United States and Japan, is still required for the peaceful entrance of Asian nations into a modernized world. China's ascent as an important player in Asian diplomacy, demonstrated by its role at the six-party talks on Korean issues, and its improved relations with the United States does not threaten the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

In the post-9/11 security environment, as an important member of the advanced nations, exemplified by its participation in the Group of Eight (G-8) summit, Japan is now obliged to play a larger global role, even in the military or paramilitary field. Perhaps even more important in the long term, the United States will need Japan as an indispensable partner for the historic project of creating peace and stability in Asia and the Pacific region. The September 11 attacks and their aftermath have increased, not reduced, the importance of the development missions of the United States and Japan in regions where Islamic extremism might fester.

## **Major Powers Realignment**

---

The world's major powers have realigned themselves in the post-September 11 international era. The archenemies of the United States during the Cold War—Russia and China—each cleverly seized the opportunity presented by new threats to breach remaining differences with the United States by offering assistance, even if sometimes symbolic, for U.S. efforts to combat Osama bin Laden and Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Although President George W. Bush had already recognized Russia as a friend in his speech at the National Defense University in early May 2001, Russia became a virtual ally in Operation Enduring Freedom by allowing the U.S. Air Force to use bases in countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, over which Moscow was believed to have some influence. President Vladimir Putin was the first among the major power leaders to call Bush to promise wholehearted support in antiterrorism efforts. In his televised speech, he went so far as to state that “we are with you and we will support you.”

The People's Republic of China also chose to support U.S. efforts in the fight against terrorism in its representative's speech at the United Nations, although the Chinese representative carefully avoided mentioning the possibly questionable issue of the right to self-defense. China's relations with the United States had been poor, particularly since the advent of the Republican administration in early 2001 and the collision of the two countries' military planes off China's Hainan Island in April of that year. After September 11, both the United States and China found reason to shift their attention away from bilateral issues and redirect their efforts toward the issue of international terrorism. It was convenient for China to define its problems of ungovernable forces in provinces such as Xinjiang in terms of antiterrorism. Whatever its real motivations might have been, Beijing could now justify its tightened control over "rogue" forces (which some Chinese leaders argue includes Taiwan's separatism) as an example of international cooperation for anti-terrorist efforts.

India and Pakistan also joined the international coalition against terrorism in their respective ways. Relations between India and the United States had improved prior to 2001, at the expense of U.S.-Pakistani relations. After the 9/11 attacks, the United States suddenly rediscovered the strategic importance of Pakistan in an anticipated war against Afghanistan. Gen. Mahmoud Ahmad, head of Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), who happened to be in Washington, D.C., at the time of the attacks, was immediately called on by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who showed the top ISI official a list of seven specific demands including the right to fly military missions over Pakistani territory. On receipt of the U.S. requests in Islamabad, President Gen. Pervez Musharraf had no choice but to accept. Under the new circumstances, it was necessary for Washington to alienate neither New Delhi nor Islamabad, even though severe tension existed between India and Pakistan over the issues of Kashmir (for which India accused Pakistan's acquiescence in, if not overt assistance of, cross-border terrorism) and Pakistani missile tests.

Although each of these countries' cooperation soon proved diplomatically contingent on U.S. adherence to the UN's multilateral principles (demonstrated by their strong reservations or objections to the U.S. decision to go to war in Iraq), the realignment of major powers after September 11, 2001, nevertheless signifies an important structural change in international relations. The structural change reflects a more fundamental reassessment

**In contrast, a U.S.-centered alliance network in Asia and the Pacific region fares well.**

of U.S. threat perception. Major powers no longer pose an imminent threat to the United States because none of them can match U.S. military strength. Ironically, the world's mightiest nation now feels vulnerable to asymmetric threats emanating from minor but defiant states and from unlawful nonstate actors, not from great powers. U.S. self-confidence coexists with hypersensitive wariness.

This fundamental threat reassessment has had two seemingly contradictory effects. As discussed above, it has helped cooperation among major

**Japan is now obliged to play a larger global role, even in the military field.**

powers, including those that had been traditionally regarded as adversaries rather than as allies. It also weakened Western alliances. The decline of the Soviet threat forced Western nations to reevaluate the role of alliances in general and NATO in particular. European NATO members have found new tasks for the alliance in the field of soft security, including humanitarian intervention and postconflict peace building in areas such as

the former Yugoslavia and to a lesser extent Africa. The United States, although sharing similar concerns as indicated by its participation in peace-keeping efforts in Kosovo and Somalia with its European partners, tended to be interested in the Middle East and Asia. Even during the Cold War, various differences between the United States and Western Europe continuously had plagued NATO, but transatlantic disparity grew deeper and wider without the common Soviet threat to hold it together.

Although the immediate impact of the September 11 attacks on transatlantic relations was positive, European misgivings and reservations remained just beneath the surface. After the catastrophic attacks initially seemed to restore transatlantic unity (hence the unprecedented invocation of the collective self-defense clause, or Article 5, of the NATO Charter), European disagreement with the U.S. tendency toward unilateral and overly militaristic solutions as well as disregard for international agreements or organizations emerged over the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. Europeans seem ambivalent, however, about the leadership role of the United States in the post-Cold War, or more precisely post-9/11, world, demonstrated by the recent efforts at the D-Day commemoration and the Sea Island G-8 summit to reemphasize the transatlantic partnership. They are clearly interested in preserving their voice on Iraq, and the Bush administration's domestic struggles prior to the U.S. election has provided them with a chance to elicit a relatively compromising stance from Washington. Thus, one should not conclude hastily that the transatlantic alliance is destined to wither but, at the same time, recognize that it is certainly facing severe tensions.

## Regional Impact

---

In contrast, a U.S.-centered alliance network in Asia and the Pacific region fares well. The impact of September 11 and the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have surely affected Asia-Pacific international relations. Most of the regional states, especially the Islamic nations in Southeast Asia, were strongly pressured by the United States to enforce effective control over transnational terrorism and other criminal activities. Reactions to U.S. unilateralism have been much more subdued here, however, than in Europe. Various factors help explain this difference. First, international relations in Asia and the Pacific region were not as clearly transformed by the end of the Cold War as they were in Europe. The Soviet presence in Asia was less prominent and less contiguous than in Europe, even if it was not insignificant and invisible. Instead, China had always been a conspicuous factor in the power configuration in Asian international relations somewhat, if not completely, independent of the U.S.-Soviet competition, even before China's remarkable economic and diplomatic ascent in recent years.

Accordingly, the demise of the Soviet Union did not hasten any dramatic and drastic changes in Asia comparable to the collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Communist-led Vietnam not only survived but also seems on its way to modernization as China was. Even the ailing Communist regime in North Korea still clings to its last breath. For China, Taiwan's international status remains an unsettled issue, while some Southeast Asian countries, especially Indonesia and the Philippines, are still struggling with the problem of nation building. Insurgencies in Aceh, Indonesia, and Mindanao, the Philippines, are graphic examples of domestic insecurity in the region. These challenges all signify an unfinished task of modernization rather than the continuation of the Cold War, and Asian governments recognize, for the most part, that the presence of a strong and reliable United States is a prerequisite to accomplish this historic task successfully. A U.S. presence, however, is a mixed blessing for Southeast Asians. Practical wisdom welcomes the Americans; the Muslim ethos repels them. The U.S.-led antiterrorist efforts in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks helped elevate rather than lessen an inherent tension in their psyche.

In light of Indonesia's huge Islamic population, which exceeds that of Egypt, Turkey, and Iran (the three largest Muslim populations in the Middle East) combined, as well as Malaysia, it is quite understandable for the United States and the international community to pay special attention to Southeast Asia, a second front in the war on terrorism. Under pressure from the United States as well as from Australia since the Bali attacks on October 12, 2002, states in the region made individual and collective efforts to

strengthen control over terrorist and other transnational criminal activities. At the same time, the danger posed by terrorist groups has also increased, partly due to heightened hostility against the United States and the West after September 11 and the war in Iraq. More importantly, a longer term and comprehensive approach is essential for addressing the root causes of the problem, such as poverty, social discrimination, and political oppression, for eventual success in the war on terrorism. In this

**Major powers no longer pose an imminent threat to the United States.**

sense, domestic insecurity in these Southeast Asian states is the product of a longer historical process, though certainly exacerbated by September 11. Depending on the future direction of the United States and the international community's renewed interest in the local conditions of Southeast Asia, anti-American (and anti-Western) feeling may well prevail over the cooperative attitude of the moment.

In Northeast Asia, traditional issues other than terrorism still linger as concerns for the region's states, including Japan. Improved Sino-U.S. relations after the 9/11 attacks have been met calmly by Japan, which also succeeded, more than China, in cementing its friendship with its traditional ally the United States. Yet, the United States needs support both from Japan and China in respective ways. Japan is assisting the United States in the Indian Ocean and in Iraq, whereas China is making efforts in the six-party talks to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Taiwan finds itself in an awkward situation, concerned about diplomatic isolation in the midst of a semblance of a big-power consortium.

This is not to say that post-September 11 developments have not had any effect on the way that Northeast Asian states are handling these traditional issues. Both the Republic of Korea and Japan, especially the former, decided to send troops to Iraq despite considerable opposition at home, in hopes of acquiring sympathy from the U.S. government over the question of North Korea. Nevertheless, Washington does not always hide its disapproval of the Roh administration's appeasing attitude toward Pyongyang. From the U.S. perspective, North Korea is definitely a target of the antiterrorism campaign in light of North Korea's suspicious relations with some Islamic countries.

As for Japan, it is more concerned about other aspects of the North Korean threat, such as abduction issues, medium-range missiles, and spy ships. Despite a similar experience of terrorist attacks by Aum Shinrikyo at a Tokyo subway station in the spring of 1995, with 12 casualties and 5,500 in-

jured from sarin gas, few Japanese people associated this experience with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. In the minds of the ordinary Japanese, Islamic extremism is a clash-of-civilizations phenomenon between the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions—something remote to the Japanese imagination. The Japanese abhor any type of clash of civilizations and are therefore inclined to define the issue of terrorism primarily in terms of economic and social disparity rather than religious strife.

## **The Pivotal Role of Japan**

---

Japan's role as a reliable U.S. ally accounts to a great degree for the relative stability of the alliance network in Asia and the Pacific region. It has played a unique and important role in the historical transformation of Asia-Pacific international relations. As a model and critical provider of financial resources and industrial technology, Japan has made a valuable contribution to modernizing underdeveloped economies in Asia, notwithstanding faults here and there. This nonmilitary aspect was and remains an indispensable ingredient of Japan's role as an ally to the United States because that was what many Asian countries needed most. One cannot fully explain the success of many Asian economies, including those in Southeast Asia and in China and Taiwan (and probably a united Korea in the future), relative to other, more unfortunate parts of the Third World, without taking into account Japan's presence.

Since the mid-1970s, Japan has been with few exceptions a leading donor for developing nations in the Asia-Pacific region. It was Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira that inaugurated pan-Pacific cooperation schemes, whose outgrowth is today's Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Apart from money and technology, Japan served as a non-Western modernization model.

The historic task of modernization remains unfinished in Asia. This task involves not only domestic issues such as economic development, nourishing constitutional democracy, and spreading the rule of law into every corner of social life, but also external challenges such as settling territorial disputes, creating a sense of community among nations, and constructing regional organizations for international cooperation. A robust alliance between the two largest economies in the world—the United States and Japan—will continue to be an essential condition for the successful achievement of that great task. This task is so huge that, notwithstanding temporary aberrations due to the pressing needs of the time, the core agenda remains unchanged, and the mission of developing Asian states gives the U.S.-Japanese alliance more of a sense of purpose than U.S.-European alliances.

Japan's behavior in the post-September 11 world is best understood as a continuation of the country's adjustment to the changing international security environment that started after the bitter experience of an ill-prepared and clumsy response to the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990-1991. With the Persian Gulf War, Japan began to realize that it could no longer afford to evade responsibility beyond its national borders under the pretext of its constitution's prohibition of the use of force. The Japanese, like many others in the world, became aware of the fact that the issue of international security is not gone with the Cold War. The Gulf War aroused anger among Japanese taxpayers because Japan contributed a total of \$12 billion in various forms for the multinational forces and war-stricken nations in the Gulf area and received little appreciation from them.

Nevertheless, it took several more months for Japan to adapt its security policy and thinking to the new reality. It was only after nervous discussions that the Japanese Diet passed the 1992 International Peace Cooperation Law, which authorized the government to send Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to Cambodia on postconflict missions. The 1947 constitution, which was essentially a product of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's occupation policy after Japan's surrender but still remains valid, prohibits the use of force as a means to settle international disputes. Nothing in the constitution specifically prohibits the dispatch of troops abroad, but domestic debates in subsequent years firmly entrenched a belief that the spirit of that document prohibited the use of force except for territorial defense (namely, as a last resort only after enemy forces actually attack Japanese territory).

Extremely cautious about provoking likely negative reactions from neighboring countries were it to use force, the Japanese government stubbornly adhered to that belief and was thus reluctant to make any military contribution at the time of the Gulf War. SDF participation in Cambodia was justified in the 1992 law as a noncombatant mission that did not contradict the spirit of the constitution. In 1998 the Japanese Diet broadened that law to allow the SDF to participate in UN-sponsored peace operations, most notably in East Timor alongside troops from Australia and South Korea, among other countries. The fact that SDF troops have been engaged in noncombatant missions and in places geographically far from Northeast Asia, the area most sensitive to Japan's military resurgence, helped ease anxiety both at home and abroad as long as those activities were conducted under the UN umbrella.

One other series of events also pushed Japan to improve its preparedness for military contingencies: North Korea's suspected development of nuclear weapons, launching its missiles over the Japanese archipelagoes, and unidentified ships engaging in dubious operations off of Japanese shores. Unlike during the Cold War era, the Korean peninsula is not likely to become a



stage of armed conflict among Russia, China, and the United States. One cannot entirely rule out, however, risks of military contingencies sparked by desperate North Korean actions. Japan should not dismiss such a contingency as someone else's concern; it would endanger Japan itself, and U.S. forces in Japan would be mobilized to meet the threat.

The U.S. and Japanese governments have improved, therefore, the modus operandi of U.S.-Japanese security cooperation by various measures newly introduced to make Japan's contribution to the alliance surer and swifter in the case of contingencies in the Far East. The United States and Japan concluded in 1996 an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement so that the SDF and U.S. armed forces can provide each other with goods and services necessary for joint exercises. They also agreed in 1997 to amend guidelines for Japanese-U.S. defense cooperation to provide a general framework and policy direction for the roles and missions of the two countries' armed forces in case of armed attacks against Japan or in contingencies in areas surrounding Japan. This marked the first time that Japan indicated its intention to commit troops beyond its national borders. A new law in 1999 addressed the question of the SDF's role in case of war in "areas surrounding Japan," the phrase commonly interpreted as contingencies in Korea. North Korea's development of medium-range missiles, whether equipped with nuclear warheads or not, certainly created a sense of urgency among the Japanese, resulting in the enactment of additional emergency laws in 2003.

By September 11, Japan had become better prepared to undertake its responsibilities as a U.S. ally and as a UN member. On account of the country's domestic debate on constitutional constraints on international military undertakings and also because of a characteristic deference for the UN, the Japanese tend to find legal justification for overseas military (or quasi-military) missions in the UN Charter. For example, the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law, enacted in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, officially enables the Japanese government to engage the SDF in overseas duties to provide "support to military forces of the United States and other foreign countries working to achieve the goals" of the UN to eliminate the "threat to international peace and security" posed by international terrorists.

Two points deserve mention regarding the significance of this post-September 11 law. First, unlike Japan's slow and inadequate response to the Gulf crisis in 1990, the country reacted rather quickly this time, thanks to

**Reactions to U.S. unilateralism have been much more subdued in Asia than in Europe.**

the significant transformation of public attitudes during the previous 10 years or so. The Japanese have become more accustomed to the concept of international security and the role of armed forces in it. Second, none of the stipulations of the U.S.-Japanese security treaty were invoked to justify Japan's participation in the U.S.-led war against Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, in contrast to NATO, which invoked Article 5 of their treaty. Instead,

**T**raditional issues other than terrorism still linger as concerns for Northeast Asia.

the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law was hastily legislated to respond immediately. This type of ad hoc approach was repeated on the occasion of the war in Iraq. These developments still leave Japan uncertain about its international obligations. The existing treaty with the United States is unusable as a legal instrument to justify overseas SDF missions in situations such as Afghanistan and Iraq. As conveyed by the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law quoted above,

Japan adheres to UN Security Council resolutions as the legal justification for its participation in multinational efforts for peace and security.

Ultimately, the impact of September 11 and its aftermath stimulated Japan into a larger, global, international security role. This change did not occur overnight but rather is a new stage of gradual adaptation that started about 10 years ago. Nor is it a complete turnaround for Japan as far as the country's strong reservations about the use of force. Despite the qualified acceptance of military obligations, its traditional emphasis on "civilian power" is very likely to be maintained in relation to international efforts to fight terrorism. Should the SDF's role in Iraq prove to be successful in assisting reconstruction and rehabilitation of that country, this experience would reinforce the Japanese ethos about the SDF as an instrument of "civilian power."

As for Asia and the Pacific region, Japan is very likely to continue to play its role as a catalyst for the historic task of modernizing developing nations. The immediate task of punishing unlawful terrorists needs to be followed by the more sober but painstaking task of getting at the roots of the issue. From a long-term perspective, it is in this realm that continued cooperation between the United States and Japan can play a decisive role to shape the future world. The U.S.-Japanese alliance will serve as the bedrock for enduring cooperation between the two nations. That type of U.S.-Japanese cooperation is essential to transform the Asia-Pacific region in an orderly manner by absorbing the inevitable effects stemming from the rise of China, peaceful or not.