

2010 – Fifty years of US-Japan Security Treaty

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East Asia is moving towards a new power polarisation. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 spelt an end to the Cold War that had gripped the region for decades.

The fading dusk of the 20th century has seen nations, large and small, congregate for shared economic, geo-political, strategic and military interests. If US President Barak Obama's visit to Asia (Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, China and Singapore) in November 2009 is an indicator of any sort, then it is most assertively of the fact that the next promising nucleus of power is emerging among the oriental states.

It is a well-known fact that after the Second World War, the United States of America emerged as the most powerful nation in the world. It boisterously held on to its invincible mantle until it was rocked by terrorist attacks in September 2001, and more recently by financial meltdown. Over the last ten years, its influence and power have waxed and waned.

America's presence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, its acrimonious relations with Iran and North Korea, and its undercutting hostility with China have left it standing alone on many counts on the global pedestal. American hegemony seems to have begun melting away like a house of wax.

Historically, America has had a long-standing interest in East and South-East Asia. And its own policies and priorities for the region have shifted innumerable times since the post-war period (World War II). American ambition has primarily consisted in finding military and economic allies within the region. And that it has done conveniently to suit its own needs.

However, as China emerges as a fire-breathing economic dragon, with trade volumes and alliances higher than any Western or Asian nation in the region, America finds itself more tightly cornered. China's growing clout as the strongest trading partner on the time-tested allies of the USA such as South Korea, Philippines, and Indonesia, is also a cause of concern for the USA.

And why shouldn't that be the case? Since this is a role that imparts the Red Dragon more muscle to strike than to lay silently and wait for a cunning moment.

Meanwhile, within East Asia, Japan has been the only economic and military power capable of casting a shadow on China's growing aspirations and dimensions. This has also made it a suitable ally for protecting the American interest in the region and bolstering its own diktat.

It is, therefore, not surprising to see Japan playing the role of America's bosom buddy for years, while consolidating its own position as the only Asian nation among the eight richest nations of the world (G-8 nations).

Japan: The American Samurai

An influential and potent Japan in East Asia has always meant an ally for the USA that could encompass other nations from the region within its direct hold and manipulate a geopolitical scenario to its interest.

Historically, Japan has maintained a strong strategic association with the USA over the last five decades. The Japan-US alliance with NATO, which was formed during the Cold War period, continues to be in effect.

However, although Japan has been riding on the wave of American hegemony in East Asia for quite some time, it now needs to factor in the emergence of China, Russia, North Korea and South Korea as growing powers from the region and analyze their interests, intentions, and inter-governmental consolidations before it can restructure its own co-operation with the USA.

The US-Japan security pact is one such bone of contention. This pact, which has existed for the last fifty years, now seems to be archaic and antiquated to the point of becoming redundant in the current geopolitical scenario. When the treaties were brought into existence during the Cold War period both, the USSR and China posed major security threats to Japan and USA. But as times changed, Japan and the US could no longer afford not to have Russia and China as their strategic and political partners.

(East Asia is no longer an isolated region and the Japan-US alliance, which has been powerful for over half-a-century, has to give way to a more multilateral approach instead of a bilateral organ.

The rifts in perception between Japan and the US over many matters of Asian and global significance have also widened and consequentially a disturbing perception gap has arisen between the two nations over many issues.

The question remains, how important is the US-Japan security arrangement for the two nations' positions towards the current geo-political scenario, the cropping differences between Japan and the USA, and whether this security treaty has outlived its purpose.

US-Japan Security Treaty/The Treaty of Mutual Cooperation: Fifty years of a lopsided agreement.

During the post war period (World War-II), Japan inked a peace treaty (1951) with the USA. The treaty clipped Japan's own ability to arm itself and defend its sovereignty. The Americans vigorously put a cold blanket on Japan's right to enter any collective security arrangements with any other nation and disallowed its inherent right to maintain armed forces.

The imbalanced one-sided treaty signed in San Francisco set conditions that conveniently governed the disposition of the American armed forces in and about Japan, whilst completely prohibiting Japan from granting any bases or right of garrison, or of maneuver, or of transit of ground, naval or air force to any other third power, without the prior consent of USA.

This uneven and unhinged San Francisco treaty was then replaced by the “Treaty of Mutual Cooperation” in Washington in 1960.

January 2010 marks fifty years of this treaty between the two nations on the opposite sides of the Pacific -a treaty that has allowed the USA to maintain and proliferate its hegemony in East Asia for half a century.

Five decades later, Japan and the USA find themselves drifting apart due to copious intricacies and challenges. Military cohesion seems to be failing to tun into amalgamation.

A stark difference in perception vis-à-vis numerous global geo-political matters is causing many a heartburns between the age-old allies.

While the American focus has primarily been extra-regional problems, such as the global war against terrorism, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and Islamic fundamentalism, Japan’s imminent security concerns have been the alarming rise of its neighbours.

For issues that have demanded global attention, Japan has traditionally adopted a policy of non-military intervention. It has most often chosen and preferred diplomacy to drive home its point.

Japan’s soft-power approach to post-conflict nation building has come to light with its stance on Afghanistan. Its central philosophy is that military means are incapable of solving problems of such variegated and complex manner.

Japan’s concern for its own security also suggests that the land of the rising sun cannot be generous in deploying troops in other troubled areas of the world, when it could need its limited armed resources at hand for any immediate exigency.

The Okinawa Conundrum

The beginning of the 21st century may serve as a reminder to Japan and the US that their dominion over each other is over and, more importantly, that they have many rivals and counterparts on the stage.

Their monopoly over each other and the East Asian region has dwindled alarmingly. With Japan wanting to bridge the “China gap” and develop stronger ties with the Red Dragon, the USA finds it increasingly difficult to get Japan to distance itself from its mighty neighbour. Both Japan and the US have developed numerous differences in their respective approaches to China.

In addition, Japan and the US have recently had sharp disagreements over the relocation of an American Marine base on the southern Japanese island of Okinawa.

Japan had chalked out a new plan in 2006 for reorganizing more than 47,000 American troops in Japan.

According to the plan 8000 marines from the Marine Corps Air Station in Futenma were to be relocated to the American territory of Guam and make Okinawa a lesser-crowded island. This plan had been designed with a view to lessen the burden on Okinawa, which hosts more than half of the American troops in Japan.

However, for obvious reasons, Americans did not want to relinquish acquired sturdy grounds. On the other hand, the Japanese government has been at the receiving end of criticisms from its own members as well as from opposition leaders and the public over the “prolonged American presence” in Okinawa.

Irate Okinawa residents have staged numerous protests complaining of base-related noise, pollution, and crime. The Social Democratic Party has already threatened the ruling government to withdraw its support if the base is moved to the northern part of the island to accommodate the Americans.

The situation has put Americans at an unease. They have vehemently expressed their frustration over the Okinawa issue.

Meanwhile, Japan realizes that a rising China not only implies a stronger economic Goliath over its shoulders but also a formidable military contender. In times when Japan is trying to edge closer to China for various geopolitical and strategic reasons, a move to resolve the dispute over the base in America’s favour could invite strong opposition from Beijing.

Considering the mounting topical pressures on Japan, both domestic and regional, and the presence of powerful neighbours such as China, Russia, South Korea and North Korea, Japan’s security treaty with the US seems to have outlived its purpose and become obsolete. The time appears to be ripe for Japan to re-analyze its own position in East Asia and craft a stronger and more advantageous line of negotiation with the Americans.

US influence on East and South East Asia is a direct function of its relations with Japan. However, Japan’s own prominence in the Far East depends crucially on how it forges ahead with its surrounding neighbours who have become challenging forces to reckon with over the last few decades.

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