



President Joe Biden Set for Summit with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga

Doug Bandow

April 14, 2021

When Will Tokyo Take Over Responsibility for Its Own Defense?

Tokyo's boosters call Japan America's most important ally. Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe forged a close relationship with President Donald Trump, playing to the latter's vanities. In response, Trump seemed to go easier on Tokyo, a longtime Pentagon cheap rider, than South Korea or Europe.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is due in Washington on Friday, April 16, and is sure to ask the Biden administration to do more to deter Chinese adventurism in nearby waters. He lacks his mentor Abe's impressive pedigree and record, but President Joe Biden, having promised to "restore" America's alliances, is likely to prove a soft touch. Indeed, the administration earlier gave away the store when it agreed that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, controlled by Tokyo but also claimed by Beijing, fell under the "mutual" defense treaty and that the U.S. had an "unwavering commitment" to intervene in any conflict over them.

Alas, the obvious question, which went unasked in last month's professed lovefest between the two nations' foreign and defense ministers, was: why does Tokyo spend so little, barely one percent of GDP, on its military if it fears war with a great power rival over conflicting territorial claims? Why isn't Japan rapidly adding more ships, planes, and missiles to deter offensive Chinese action?

Tokyo cannot argue that it is overburdened since it devotes less effort to the military than do its Asian neighbors, including even the Philippines. More important, Japan lags far behind its potential adversaries, China and North Korea. Tokyo also devotes a smaller share of its GDP to the military than does almost every European member of NATO. Either Japan faces no serious threats or figures America will handle its security.

If the former, why should the US waste effort and resources on Japan's defense? If the latter, why should overloaded Americans, who also are paying to protect several other East Asian nations, most of Europe, much of the Middle East and North Africa, and part of Central Asia, do more so Japan can do less? The current relationship makes no sense.

To raise these issues is not to reject mutually beneficial security cooperation between the two nations. However, the seven-decade-old alliance – it is not and never has been a "mutual"

relationship – discourages Tokyo from doing what every serious nation should do, provide for its defense. There were historical reasons why the American commitment and deployment originally operated like the infamous "cap in the bottle" claimed by American Lt. Gen. Harry Stackpole. However, that world has been swept away.

It is now 76 years after World War II, making that conflict as distant from today as it was from the Meiji Restoration. The likelihood of an imperial revival with Japan conquering its neighbors has passed into the realm of fantasy. Once fearful nations like the Philippines now ask Tokyo to do more militarily.

Moreover, regional challenges are increasing. Both North Korea and China raise significant security concerns, but far more to nearby countries and especially Japan than America.

The North has long-standing grievances against its onetime colonial masters in Tokyo, which is vulnerable to missile attack. In contrast, Pyongyang's weapons are only deterrents to the US, since a first strike would result in devastating retaliation. The People's Republic of China also has historically rooted antagonisms toward Japan. The PRC is arming against America too, but for defense in its own neighborhood. Any conflict would occur thousands of miles from America.

Hence, Japan is at greater risk than the US and capable of doing much more on its own behalf. Tokyo should stop relying on the bankrupt republic a large ocean away.

Japan is well-positioned to constrain Chinese aggressiveness. Even its modest military efforts have yielded a sizable and modern force. Despite having a smaller economy overall, Tokyo remains far wealthier than the PRC and diverts far less funds to internal security, i.e., repression, allowing Japan to spend substantially more than present on its armed forces. As an archipelago with no land borders Japan also is in a better strategic position than China. In contrast, the PRC is surrounded by countries with which it has been at war over the last century: India, Korea, Russia, and Vietnam. Tokyo could mimic China and emphasize anti-access/area denial capabilities, which Beijing hopes will deter US military operations nearby.

Moreover, Tokyo could help establish a collaborative network with its neighbors. In its report *Defense of Japan 2020* the Abe government noted that "a regional cooperation framework in the security realm has not been sufficiently institutionalized in the Indo-Pacific region." A growing if informal coalition beckons.

Australia's attitude toward the PRC has hardened. South Korea has suffered economic reprisals by China, which continues to underwrite North Korea. Manila's efforts to ingratiate itself with Beijing have not limited the latter's aggressive maritime activity. Vietnam has clashed with the PRC over conflicting claims involving the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Similarly, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, while not interested in a formal anti-China alliance, share an interest in regional peace and stability.

Significantly, India, at serious odds with the PRC over their land borders, has extended its reach into the Pacific. In a report for the Center for Strategic and International Studies Mitsuko Hayashi observed: "Defense ties with India have developed in the maritime sphere since the first [Japanese] participation in the multilateral Malabar exercise in the Indian Ocean in 2007 but also among the ground services, such as anti-terrorism exercises held in India in 2018 and 2019."

Of course, it is up to the Japanese people to decide how much to spend on their military. Washington will inevitably badger its allies to do more when it is tasked with defending them since the less they do means the more Americans are expected to spend, provide, and risk. The frequent result is the pitiable spectacle of US officials complaining, commanding, entreating, insisting, criticizing, exhorting, demanding, whining, insulting, and finally begging friendly governments to do more militarily *for themselves*. Yet any suggestion that Washington do less generates cacophonous wailing and frenetic gnashing of teeth as alliance advocates aver that America must always do more to protect other nations even if they do less themselves.

However, there is no reason for Washington to do what Tokyo could do. The present alliance, with some 54,000 Americans stationed in Japan (unfairly concentrated in Okinawa, which the US ruled from 1945 to 1972), demonstrates the essential truth of President Donald Trump's complaints against America's defense dependents. His solution, however, was to shake down other states, essentially hiring out US military personnel to other countries. His opening annual bids were \$5 billion and \$8 billion from South Korea and Japan, respectively. That approach was a bust – the allies simply said no – and a bad idea since Americans should not be treated as the modern equivalent of mercenaries.

Instead, Washington should announce that it plans to shift defense responsibilities to capable partners. Which means Tokyo should forthrightly confront its China challenge. So far the PRC's ambitions appear bounded: reclaiming territory once seized by avaricious neighbors and colonial powers. That could change, of course. However, as noted earlier, Japan is well able to deter Chinese aggression.

Moreover, Washington still could backstop Tokyo's independence, which doesn't appear to be at issue – even the most fervent China hawks do not predict a Sino invasion force sailing to conquer Honshu Island anytime soon – and otherwise cooperate to advance common objectives. However, the US should make clear that Japan's defense is now Tokyo's responsibility. And while refusing to discuss contested territorial claims with the PRC is up to Japan, so is dealing with the consequences. Settling ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands isn't America's responsibility.

Some Japanese already are pushing for a larger and more vigorous Japanese military. Abe's defense minister, Taro Kono, pointed to foreign military activity to argue: "All cards should be on the table." There also is increased discussion of being able to preempt foreign attacks, most obviously a possible North Korean missile attack. A more restrictive American stance would necessitate a broader Japanese debate over such issues.

The issue of nuclear weapons could arise as well. That's obviously a hot button issue for the Japanese people. However, Washington's policy of "extended deterrence" is a bad deal for America. Why should the US risk Los Angeles, Chicago, or Washington, D.C. for Tokyo? As that seems ever less believable the policy becomes less credible. Japan going nuclear would be fraught with difficulties and downsides, but still might be the best of a bunch of bad options.

Of course, Article 9 of Japan's "peace constitution," imposed by Washington during the post-World War II occupation, technically forbids possession of a military. However, Tokyo always has creatively interpreted the restriction. Whether Japan should amend its constitution is not America's business. If the US does less, the Japanese people will be left to decide if they want to do more and, if so, how to do so.

America should embrace the world. However, that doesn't mean America should protect the world. The US is militarily overextended and financially busted. Prosperous democratic allies should take over their own defense, instead of expecting Washington's guardianship forever. Why not start with Japan? Biden should communicate that message when Suga arrives on Friday.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.