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The Evolution of the U.S.-Japan Alliance and its Implications for South Korea

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In the context of declining approval ratings, the tenure of Prime Minister Kishida, specifically in his role as President of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), will conclude in September of this year. As the instability of the Kishida Cabinet persists, the LDP presidential election, scheduled for this autumn, is expected to bring political change in Japan. This election may result in the re-establishment of the Kishida Cabinet or the emergence of a new administration. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that Japan's foreign policy, particularly its approach toward the U.S., will not undergo significant changes due to the LDP's continued dominance. Despite the relatively limited domestic approval ratings of the Kishida Cabinet, the U.S.-Japan relationship has effectively established itself as an "acting alliance."

1. The Evolution of the U.S.-Japan Alliance: From 'Alliance Protection' to 'Alliance Projection'

The U.S.-Japan summit in April 2024 between President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida marked a transition from the 'alliance protection' relationship, formalized in 1960, to an 'alliance projection' relationship, characterized by cooperation for strategic goals. The summit signified a shift from a one-sided protection relationship to a partnership where both parties play equally significant roles. Both countries evaluated this as "the most important upgrade since the 1960 U.S.-Japan Alliance," indicating an expansion of Japan's role in security and its position in the international community.

The United States' Security Strategy: A Shift from a Hub-and-Spoke Model to a Lattice-Like Structure

The United States is undergoing a notable transformation in its security strategy, shifting from the traditional hub-and-spoke model to a lattice-like structure. This shift aims to gain a competitive advantage over China and reinforce the United States' containment of China. The U.S. proposal entails fostering alliances with allied and partner countries, thereby

establishing numerous mini-lateral cooperative frameworks. This strategy underscores collective strength and joint action, allowing partner countries to respond collectively.

In contrast to the previous security structure, which centered on the U.S. (hub) with bilateral alliances with countries such as South Korea and Japan (spokes), the proposed new model places greater emphasis on strengthening the ties among allies, thereby facilitating a collective response. It is imperative to enhance the capabilities of allied and partner countries, thereby reducing the United States' role and burden while reinforcing security coordination in a densely interconnected and integrated manner.

It is notable that while the United States was previously situated at the core of the Indo-Pacific security structure, the emerging approach (lattice-like structure) could see both the United States and Japan positioned at the center. In this evolving security framework, the roles previously undertaken solely by the United States will now be shared by the United States and Japan. Furthermore, U.S.-Japan bilateral cooperation will expand to include third and fourth countries. This represents a shift from a 'line' to a 'surface' dimension of collaboration. This signifies a deeper and broader U.S.-Japan alliance aimed at containing China and enhancing Japan's role in this effort.

In the context of the U.S.-Japan summit, both countries defined each other as "global partners." This signifies a shift in focus from a partnership previously concentrated on the Indo-Pacific region to one that encompasses global issues. Consequently, Japan's engagement in a multitude of global issues within the international community is now justifiable, thereby enhancing its role, status, and influence. Simultaneously, this shift signals a transition from a relationship where Japan enjoyed the protection of the U.S. to one where Japan engages in joint actions with the U.S. This new direction will be evident in diplomacy and security. The connection between the 'command and control' structures of U.S. forces in Japan and the Japan Self-Defense Forces has been reinforced, resulting in an agreement on the joint development and production of weapons.

The United States and Japan have agreed to "upgrade alliance command and control", which signifies an improvement in the command and control capabilities of both U.S. forces in Japan and the Japan Self-Defense Forces, enabling smooth coordination of operations and capabilities. To attain this, the United States and Japan will modernize their current command and control systems, ensuring a fully integrated outcome. The Japanese government has announced plans to establish a Joint Operations Command, integrating the operations of the country's land, sea, and air self-defense forces. Following the U.S.-Japan Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meeting (2+2) held on July 28, both governments announced that to strengthen the command and control link between the Self-Defense Forces and the U.S. military, the U.S. would reorganize its forces in Japan. This reorganization will unite the Army, Navy, and Air Force under a newly formed "Integrated Military Command", granting the aforementioned command operational authority.

This process will facilitate enhanced deterrence and a coordinated response to potential regional security challenges, whether in peacetime or crisis. The alliance, which previously saw Japan assume the role of a “shield” while the United States took on that of a “spear,” is now undergoing a transformation that will permit Japan to perform duties extending far beyond those of a mere “shield.”

2. A Significant Transformation in Japan’s Security Policy and Future Outlook

Japan’s security policy has undergone a gradual yet substantial transformation over the past nearly eight decades since the end of World War II. In consequence, Japan, which had renounced military power and the right to engage in combat while maintaining merely minimal defensive capabilities, is now assuming a position of prominence alongside the United States in confronting the various challenges facing the international community. The support and trust now extended to Japan by the United States will serve to strengthen the foundation for the fundamental strengthening of Japan's defensive capabilities. Japan is expected to enhance its defense capabilities while addressing a range of security concerns within the international community. Moreover, Japan will progressively assume a more prominent position in the international arena, particularly in matters pertaining to diplomacy and security.

Japan has already taken steps to enhance its defense capabilities through the National Security Strategy, introduced in December 2022, and the revision of the Three Principles for the Transfer of Defense Equipment in December 2023. Furthermore, restrictions on the export of Japanese defense equipment have been eased, facilitating its access to international markets. In December 2023, Japan decided to export the Patriot missile for the first time as a finished weapon. Additionally, in March 2024, the Japanese government reached an agreement with the United Kingdom and Italy to jointly develop and export next-generation fighter jets. Furthermore, on July 29, Japan concluded a contract to provide Patriot missiles to the United States at an approximate value of 3 billion yen. This, in conjunction with prospective joint development and production of weaponry with the United States, is anticipated to contribute to the expansion of Japan’s defense industry.

The command and control linkages and the production and export of weapons agreed upon during the recent U.S.-Japan summit may potentially conflict with Japan’s constitution. Firstly, the constitutional constraints that Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF) operate under make it challenging for them to unify command and control with the U.S. military. Therefore, it is paramount to establish how each command and control system will be linked. The use of military force by the U.S. may be considered unconstitutional if it occurs prior to a “situation of armed attack” or “survival-threatening situation,” as defined by the Japanese government.

Secondly, inconsistencies may arise regarding the ‘Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment’, which underwent relaxation last year, during the joint development and export of weapons. More fundamentally, there may exist discrepancies between domestic and international perspectives regarding the perception of the SDF as a military force. This issue is directly related to the stipulation in Article 9, Paragraph 2 of the constitution that military forces must be prohibited from being maintained. Although a constitutional amendment is unlikely in the near future, given the requirement for a two-thirds majority in both the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors, as well as the approval of more than half of the public, the debate surrounding the necessity for a constitutional amendment to prevent conflicts with the constitution in light of Japan's evolving security policies may intensify.

3. Implications for South Korean Diplomacy and Policy Recommendations

In the evolving U.S. security cooperation network, there is a shift from the traditional hub-and-spoke structure focused on bilateral relationships centered on the U.S. to a latticework structure that emphasizes the importance of cooperation among U.S. allies and other like-minded countries. Additionally, there is an expansion of cooperative endeavors beyond traditional security measures, which will lead to an increase in Japan’s status within this network. Japan’s involvement and role in the international community will likely expand in various areas. Moreover, it is unlikely that long-established Japanese diplomatic and security policies will undergo significant changes from a mid- to long-term perspective, irrespective of the political administration in power in Japan. In this context, what considerations should South Korea make?

Firstly, South Korea’s position in the context of U.S.-Japan cooperation has undergone a significant shift, progressing from a ‘line’ to a ‘surface’. Japan is leveraging the United States’ latticework structure and developing various minilateral cooperation systems, including the U.S.-Japan-UK, U.S.-Japan-Australia, U.S.-Japan-India-Australia, and U.S.-Japan-Philippines. Japan’s movements have the potential to significantly impact the stability and security of South Korea’s role within the United States’ alliance network. This is due to the difficulty of accepting South Korea’s position as one of the members of the U.S.-Japan cooperation structure or in a hierarchical relationship. Moreover, the diplomatic and security position of South Korea is likely to become more challenging if such minilateral cooperation is perceived to be geared towards checking China. South Korea must navigate its relations with China to address the North Korean issue, making it challenging to play an active role in the U.S. alliance to counterbalance China compared to Japan. Concurrently, it is challenging to refrain from commenting on China’s actions that deviate from established international norms from the perspective of a value-based diplomatic approach. Despite participation in minilateral cooperation centered on U.S.-Japan cooperation, South Korea must establish a clear policy direction. As a party to the resolution of the North Korean issue and peace on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea must continue to make efforts to inform, seek understanding,

and respond flexibly to networks that exhibit strong characteristics of checks against China. Future discussions will likely focus on South Korea's participation in AUKUS Pillar Two. While the argument is developing that this move is in the country's national interests in terms of economic and technological security, and is not a means of countering China, the decision on whether and how to participate will have to be made.

Secondly, it is essential to identify and pursue opportunities for South Korea to engage in collaborative initiatives with other countries within the context of minilateral cooperation, particularly with the United States and Japan. South Korea should continue to explore avenues for collaborative engagement with other countries, including the United States, Japan, the Quad, and Australia, within the context of expanding minilateral cooperation. For instance, the potential for technical cooperation at AUKUS Pillar 2 and cooperation with Quad countries in the fields of health and the environment should be given due consideration. Moreover, the necessity of pursuing collaboration on behalf of both South Korea and Japan, rather than the United States, must be acknowledged. Given their geographical proximity, South Korea and Japan have the potential to cooperate in various areas pertaining to non-traditional security. Potential areas for cooperation may include disaster management, search and rescue at sea, joint response to counter-terrorism and piracy, and joint response to climate change. It would be beneficial for South Korea and Japan to expand their collaborative efforts by co-hosting a democracy summit. This event could facilitate dialogue with other democracies based on the fundamental principles of democracy that both South Korea and Japan espouse. Additionally, maintaining ongoing engagement with the four Asia-Pacific partners (AP4: South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand) would be advantageous.

Thirdly, efforts should be made to acknowledge Japan's history while facilitating its increased involvement in global security matters. Japan's stance on historical matters may contribute to the prevailing negative perception of Japan in South Korea, particularly in the context of Japan's engagement with the United States on a range of global issues and its growing role and status within the international community. It is crucial to underscore Japan's resolve to avoid repeating its historical missteps and to contribute to maintaining global order and world peace within the international community. This endeavor is particularly evident in Japan's role in the realm of security and the U.S.-Japan alliance. It is also incumbent upon the state to disseminate historical information and ensure that future generations are aware of their country's past. Over the past few decades, differences in historical perception have negatively impacted cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, resulting in conflicts and confrontations. Efforts to narrow this gap of perception and understanding through continuous strategic dialogue, not only between the government but also between experts, scholars, and opinion leaders, are imperative.

Domestically, it is presumed that Prime Minister Kishida is seeking a second term in the Liberal Democratic Party presidential election scheduled for September, despite the prevailing unstable domestic political climate. In foreign affairs, Kishida articulated his intention to enhance the country's ability to deter and respond effectively to a changing global landscape, addressing regional concerns such as the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, China's attempt to change the status quo, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Furthermore, bilateral relations between the United States and Japan are not influenced by the outcome of the forthcoming U.S. presidential election in November. The Japanese government will establish an institutional mechanism to reinforce its status as the United States' most closely allied nation and a crucial global partner on a range of issues within the international community.

Prime Minister Kishida's diplomacy represents the current approach to foreign policy in Japan, shaped by the long-term strategies of the Liberal Democratic Party. It seems unlikely that forming a new cabinet within the Liberal Democratic Party will result in a significant change to the Party's diplomatic approach. Instead, it appears more reasonable to posit that a distinct direction has been established and is gradually being implemented over an extended period. In other words, Japan intends to collaborate with the United States to become an "Alliance in Action" and to assume a pioneering role in the formulation of international standards and order within the global community. To effectively navigate the current geopolitical landscape, a more long-term approach to diplomacy may be required for South Korea.

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