On April 17, U.S. President Bill Clinton and Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto reconfirmed that the United States and Japan should firmly uphold and strengthen the framework of the U.S.-Japan security treaty into the 21st century. But it is highly doubtful that the people of either nation support this commitment wholeheartedly. Last year, I lived in the United States for six months and came to feel that Americans have become rather apathetic about Japan. If my observation is correct, one must wonder whether Americans consider Japan a true ally.

Recently Michael Powell, former deputy director of the Japan desk at the Pentagon, gave a speech in New York that offered a convincing account of Americans’ shift on Japan. As the son of Colin Powell, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he may be said to reflect the opinions of both the Pentagon and his father.

Debunking what he called the “five myths” of the Japan-U.S. security relationship, Powell argued that the relationship is not stable because the responsibilities are not balanced. The United States guarantees Japan’s defense, but Japan does little more than provide bases for the U.S. troops. He said Americans want to feel close to their allies, but this is difficult with Japan since soldiers from the two countries do not stand shoulder-to-shoulder in combat situations.

Most probably, Powell’s arguments represented the sentiments of a cross-section of Americans, from staunch advocates to solid opponents of the Japan-U.S. security treaty. Powell singled out the following five problems:
1. Japan and the United States do not really have an alliance since Washington cannot be assured of support from Japan in a crisis.

2. Japanese and U.S. officials are trying to maintain a wall between economic and security issues; the result has been cynicism among politicians and the general public.

3. U.S. and Japanese officials argue that the security alliance is necessary to prevent a revival of militarism in Japan. (“That is absurd and an insult to Japan,” Powell said.)

4. “Japan one day will have to participate in the protection of its interests offshore,” such as sea lanes, “or Japan will lose the support of other countries. Americans are not going to send their sons to die in places where Japan’s interests are at stake, if Japan will not participate itself.”

5. Japan’s Constitution is not a legal barrier to Japanese participation in overseas security operations.

In the Japan-U.S. security setup, it is not clear what specific roles Japan will play in emergencies. That leaves the Japan-U.S. alliance defective and ineffectual. Hashimoto made tremendous efforts to bring about the bilateral acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA). While not very significant, this accord marks a step forward in correcting defective security arrangements and restoring U.S. trust in Japan. Under the new agreement Japan will supply fuel and equipment to U.S. troops stationed in Japan in peacetime.

The Foreign Ministry remained undecided, as usual, as to whether it should approve the agreement due to differences in the Japanese and U.S. legal systems. I was told that the ministry had finally agreed to support the accord under angry orders from Hashimoto. Japanese politicians rarely take up issues regarding national emergencies and military affairs during an election. Politicians who preach unrealistic views of pacifism have a greater chance of winning an election than serious, hawkish ones. Japanese politicians’ “principles” normally differ from their true intentions, and their statements in Japan also differ from those they make abroad, especially regarding defense affairs. Such behavior inevitably leads the Japanese people to worry only about Japan’s safety and not take into account international concerns.

Remarks by two former prime ministers, Morihiro Hosokawa and Kiichi Miyazawa, recently drew attention in the United States and Britain. But their comments were not reported in Japan, and neither man repeated them at home although both had the chance to do so.

Hosokawa visited the United States in the middle of March and made a bold proposal for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Okinawa Prefecture in speeches at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington and the Japan-America Society in Seattle. He referred to the European arrangement that allows the pre-positioning of critical American military supplies and provides a framework for the dispatch of personnel during an emergency, and
he asked, “Under such a scheme, could we not develop procedures that would allow for a reduction in the area and facilities of U.S. bases in Japan? More specifically, it should be possible to transfer the main marine bases in Okinawa to Hawaii or Guam.”

Hosokawa’s speech of March 12 was reported the following day in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. Major U.S. newspapers did not report his proposal, although it was carried worldwide on the Internet. Hosokawa seemed surprised that his remarks shocked some Americans, but he did not repeat the proposal in Japan.

Miyazawa aired his views in an exclusive interview with the Tokyo correspondent of the British newspaper The Guardian. The story started with a sensational lead, quoting Miyazawa as warning that “if his country loses or throws off the protection of the U.S. defense umbrella, it will be forced to become a nuclear power.” Miyazawa was also quoted as saying that some Asian countries believe that Japan is the real threat, while others believe that China poses a threat. “So the linchpin is the American presence,” Miyazawa said. “If the Americans withdrew and if China became a big military power and was seen as threatening Japan, then it may lead Japan to become a big military power.” Miyazawa also said “it may be easier for Americans to understand if they realize that the alternative (to the U.S. military presence in Asia) will be a nuclear Japan.”

I know of no other Japanese politician who has referred to the possibility of Japan’s acquiring nuclear weapons, although it looms as a very real possibility in the minds of many Americans. Miyazawa is a leading Japanese politician well-versed in U.S. affairs. So why did he speak out in favor of a firmer maintenance of the Japan-U.S. security treaty by implying that otherwise Japan might acquire nuclear weapons?

It seems to me that it is time for Japanese politicians to speak out openly in Japan on the Japan-U.S. security arrangements. They should not only speak to people outside Japan but also take up these crucial issues and debate them at home. They have a responsibility to give some real meaning to the Japan-U.S. alliance—an alliance that is a sand castle at present.

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by Edith Terry

The Cold War made it possible for Japan to ‘un-educate’ its public on issues of national security. Words like “security” and “strategy” have been taboo even in the corridors of Japan’s National Defense Agency. The military apparatus that guarded Japan while it achieved its economic miracle has been all but invisible to ordinary Japanese.
But Japan’s innocence in security matters could quickly become a liability to its allies in the region. According to the *Asahi* newspaper, in 1994, when U.S. hawks were threatening air strikes against suspected North Korean nuclear installations, Japanese officials dithered for weeks over whether to allow transit rights for U.S. troops in the event of such a confrontation. Seven years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Japan’s defense establishment continues to slumber in a Cold War cocoon.

The reaffirmation of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty announced by Clinton and Hashimoto on April 17 should somewhat relieve anxieties in East and Southeast Asia, rattled by China’s recent military exercises in the Taiwan Straits and Pyongyang’s unilateral declaration of an end to the Korean truce arrangements. A less comforting fact is that the alliance is fraying from within.

It is no secret that Washington is finding it increasingly difficult to sell the American public on paying the costs of American troops stationed abroad. Ted Galen Carpenter, an analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, argued in a report last fall that the U.S. should withdraw its forces from Japan in the next five years. Carpenter claims that since the 1950s, the U.S. had spent $900 billion to defend Japan from potential enemies--too much in view of Japan’s economic strength and rivalry with the U.S. His key argument, however, is an attack on the philosophical foundations of the security treaty. The treaty is “unequal” he charges, because the U.S. is obliged to defend Japan, but Japan will join U.S. troops only in case of a direct attack on the home islands.

There has been no serious public discussion of security issues in Japan for half a century. Neither the Japanese public or political leaders are prepared to deal with a military crisis in which Japan might be called upon to play a decisive role--such as a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, or missile attacks by North Korea on the South.

Like a blind man tapping his way across a lane of heavy traffic, Japan has so far miraculously escaped untouched. But as Asian security becomes more complex, Japan may find it increasingly impractical to take its accustomed enigmatic stance on regional conflicts of interest, leaving the actual work of formulating policy to others. For one thing, the traffic is likely to become heavier, as China and Southeast Asian nations continue their rapid military build-up, at least in part due to expectations of an eventual U.S. military withdrawal.

Any signs that Japan is moving toward a more autonomous security policy are few and far between. The ‘Okinawa rape incident’ of last September got a huge play in Okinawa, where 75 percent of US troops are stationed, but less in the rest of Japan, where U.S. troops constitute little more than an occasional annoyance. The Okinawa incident has yet to translate into any official acknowledgment that U.S. troops are on their way out, or that Japan may have to pick up where America leaves off, despite the announced closing of the Marine Air Corps Base at Futenma in Okinawa. Japan’s own national defense program outline, revised last November for the first time since 1976, scrupulously avoids listing threats that might require specific military responses, such as the closing of sea lanes or missile launches in nearby waters.
Even so, there are one or two straws in the wind. On April 8, Japan’s Keizai Doyukai, or Federation of Employers, called on the Japanese Diet to review the U.S.-Japan security alliance. In a report, the federation argued that the continued expansion of Japanese business interests overseas “no longer allows the business community to remain indifferent to security affairs. Business relations cannot go smoothly unless Japan plays its due role in the international community.”

Few in Asia want to see an end to the U.S.-Japan security alliance. But a Japan that remains devoted to a Cold War status quo is unlikely to be of help to itself or its neighbors in the event of a major crisis.

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