On his death bed in 211 A.D., after eighteen years ruling the Roman empire, Emperor Septimius Severus warned his successor and future leaders in centuries thereafter, “Keep the soldiers happy.” Bill Clinton did anything but that during his two terms. America’s first post-Cold War president launched one assault after another on the design, mission, and funding of America’s military services; he tried to refashion the Pentagon into a military tool useful for the 21st century, and for this he drew great disdain from the majority of America’s national security establishment. While books about political intrigue and sexual scandal in the Clinton White House will continue to be published for many years, the most important analyses of this presidency will focus on the dramatic and disturbing erosion in presidential management and control of the military. U.S.-Japan security and economic relations over the last eight years reflect the enormous tension between the White House and Pentagon, and the recent “Armitage Report” is an important manifestation of the military bureaucracy’s efforts to undermine its commander in chief.

When Bill Clinton won the presidency in 1992, he started out on the worst of terms with his generals. Not only did rumors of Vietnam draft evasion swirl around his candidacy, but at the very start of his administration, Clinton threatened the institutionalized homophobia of the armed services by ordering that gays and lesbians be allowed to serve in the military. Although the president backtracked and instituted the problematic “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” the battle lines between Clinton’s inner circle and the national security bureaucracy were clearly etched. Making matters more pronounced, Clinton questioned the raison d’etre of the Pentagon and a national security structure designed for superpower rivalry. His electoral mantra, “it’s the economy, stupid” was underscored by his pre-inaugural, three-day Little Rock Economic Summit in 1992. It marginalized the nation’s military elite and made them appear irrelevant to the future. While the Bush team was soul-searching over why the Gulf War victory hadn’t delivered electoral success to their commander-in-chief, Clinton simply argued for more butter, and for slashing the guns budget. Few foes could make the world’s most powerful military force feel insecure, but Bill Clinton excelled at it.

The Role of Japan

An area of long-term critical importance to America’s national security establishment has been the defense arrangement with and forward basing of U.S. troops in Japan. Since the end of U.S. occupation of Japan in 1952, America has crafted a grand bargain, begun by John Foster Dulles, whereby it provided unique and easy access to American markets for
Japan’s export industries in exchange for Japan’s support of U.S. bases on its soil. This arrangement has been frayed and tested from time to time, on either the economic or the military side of the equation, but with only cosmetic modifications it has remained largely unaltered over five decades.

The U.S. Army, Navy, Marine, and Air Force personnel stationed in Japan had multiple missions during the Cold War, the most important of which was to deter Soviet aggression and, less explicitly, to act as a guarantor against any revival of Japanese militarism. Over time, Japan became America’s largest weapons buyer, both purchasing and licensing production of America’s top line weapons programs to equip its Self Defense Forces. American and Japanese national security officials drew closer to each other and generally ignored the trade and economic issues that were occasionally disturbing the “broader relationship.” In other words, in U.S.-Japan policy matters, defense priorities always trumped economic ones. After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. generals wanted to keep their bases, continue to sell their weapons to Japan, and maintain their dominance in determining U.S.-Japan policy. Therein lay the core of the tension between those in the Clinton administration who believed Japan was taking unfair advantage of the U.S. on the economic front and those who felt that our ability to maintain bases in the Pacific mattered most of all.

Enter the Armitage Report

This historical context is important in understanding the institutional significance of the Armitage Report, a 7-page white paper issued on October 11, 2000, by a 16-member study group under the leadership of former Defense Department official Richard Armitage. Armitage has just been nominated by George W. Bush to serve as Deputy Secretary of State, the job most recently held by Strobe Talbot. Published by the Institute for National Strategic Studies as a Special Report (available on the internet at http://www.ndu.edu/ndu/sr_japan.html), “The United States and Japan: Advancing Toward a Mature Partnership” is the manifesto of a group of people who have worked for both Clinton and previous Republican administrations but who are most of all devoted to the survival and welfare of the Pentagon. Their activities, particularly those who worked for or advised the Pentagon, sought to establish a policy framework for Japan that ran counter to that being pursued by the Clinton administration.

Of the sixteen members of the Armitage study group, seven worked for the Bush/Reagan Defense Department and one for the CIA/National Security Council. Four people, including Joseph Nye and Kurt Campbell, two of the key architects of America’s commitment to maintain 100,000 troops in the region for an indefinite period of time and key Clinton administration rivals to his economic team, served directly or as very close collaborators and consultants for the Office of International Security Affairs in the Pentagon during Clinton’s terms. Both Nye and Armitage have headed the Office of International Security Affairs, but their party affiliations matter far less than their shared contempt for Clinton’s trade policies with Japan and their dedication to the survival of classical Pentagon interests in Asia. Only Edward Lincoln of the Brookings Institution; Frank Januzzi, a staffer for Senator Biden; Dan Bob of former Senator Roth’s staff; and
Barbara Wanner, a long-term employee of the Japan Economic Institute (funded by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs), did not come from the military/national security establishment.

What the Report Argues

The Armitage report argues that the Clinton administration was plagued by an episodic, ad hoc approach to its security and economic relations with Japan, a statement with which I do not disagree. But the report’s own treatment of Japan’s economic malaise and the reasons for its condition are naive and not well connected to its fundamental message. This message is that America needs to reaffirm its commitment to security matters with Japan, restore the relationship to the kind of partnership enjoyed in the past, and relegate economic priorities to a lower level. The Bush administration seems fully prepared to carry out this agenda.

One of the most amazing feats of military doublespeak in this report is that it argues vigorously for maintaining a heavy presence of forces in Japan without discussing any of the key contingencies for which these forces might possibly be used. At the same time it acknowledges that “adjustments [to force structure] should not be based on an artificial number [Nye’s 100,000 troops]” and that “the United States should consider broader and more flexible deployment and training options for the Marines throughout the region.” In fact, nearly all of the study group members have publicly argued against any fundamental restructuring of the U.S. presence in Japan, and despite accepting a so-called “footprint reduction” in the Special Action Committee on Okinawa accord (SACO), the Pentagon has been extremely slow in implementing that agreement. Thus, the kind of military flexibility suggested by the Armitage report is actually in utter conflict with the positions espoused by Armitage and other study group members in the past.

In a special box labeled “Okinawa,” the report insists that the largest concentration of American troops must remain there because “in matters of security, distance matters. Okinawa is positioned at the intersection of the East China Sea and the Pacific Ocean--only about one hour’s flying time from Korea, Taiwan, and the South China Sea.” If these are, indeed, the key contingencies the Pentagon is worried about, perhaps it should also worry about the fact that Japan is not likely to allow its territory to be used in a war with either Korea or China. It should be recalled that during the last Korean conflict Japan was still under U.S. occupation, and that during the Vietnam war Okinawa had still not reverted to Japanese control.

Dictating to Japan

Perhaps the strangest aspect of the Armitage Report is that roughly half of it is filled with suggestions for what Japan must do. “Japan’s prohibition against collective self-defense is a constraint on alliance cooperation. Lifting this prohibition would allow for closer and more efficient security cooperation.” In other words, Japan should alter its postwar Constitution and repeal Article 9, in which it forever eschews wars of aggression (but not self-defense). The U.S. should make “priority availability of U.S. defense technology to
Japan” and “broaden the scope of U.S.-Japan missile defense cooperation.” In other words, Japan should continue to buy U.S. weapons and even produce them under U.S. licensing agreements.

According to the Armitage Report, “Tokyo has made it clear that existing U.S.-Japan intelligence ties do not meet its needs” -- one reason Japan is sending up some of its own satellites. But the U.S. would like a look at whatever intelligence Japan garners because otherwise “our perception-- and possibly our policies-- will diverge.” That Japan might actually have some foreign policy goals of its own is evidently not within the realm of possibility as far as the report is concerned.

Japan must also improve its economy because “a weak Japan contributes to volatility and uncertainty in global capital flows” -- that is, it will not be able to continue financing the U.S.’s staggering trade deficits. Therefore Japan must open its market, “there must be greater transparency in accounting, business practices, and rule making. . . . Deregulation should be accelerated . . . Washington should start a dialogue on enhancing foreign direct investment in Japan [and] seek the elimination of industrial tariffs, agricultural subsidies, and barriers to trade.”

One wonders what the Japanese think of all of this, particularly since the report accuses them of being “averse to radical change, except in circumstances where no other options exist” and also acknowledges that its prescriptions will “require some short-term costs that Japanese politicians so far have refused to incur.” What would we think if a similar Japanese report urged Americans to change their constitution on matters of defense, consume less, save more, and send U.S. Marines home? (In fact, on January 19, one day before the American inauguration, the Okinawan prefectural assembly unanimously called for a reduction of U.S. military personnel stationed on the island.) Armitage and his Pentagon buddies seem to believe they are firmly in the driver’s seat of not only American but also Japanese foreign policy. We shall have to wait and see whether this is so, or whether the new administration needs to think about more than just keeping its generals happy.

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