In the next few weeks, the crucial dilemma facing U.S. security policy in the Asia-Pacific region will be highlighted when the new guidelines for the Japan American Security Alliance (JASA) are finalized on September 24th, and one month later China’s president Jiang Zemin arrives in Washington for his first state visit with President Clinton.

The dilemma arises because the two principal elements of U.S. security policy in the region—“revitalizing” JASA, and “engagement” of China—are in conflict with one another. Advancing the first retards the second. The two impending events are reflective of this conflict.

The conflict springs from several sources: inherent ambiguity of the term “engagement,” and Chinese suspicions that it is really a euphemism for a U.S. strategy of “containment” designed to keep China’s ascending power in check; Chinese concerns that a revitalized JASA is a part of this strategy, and may weigh (adversely, from China’s standpoint) in the balance of forces affecting Taiwan’s future; China’s fears that—intentionally or inadvertently—revitalizing JASA runs the risk of re-igniting Japanese militarism; and residual Chinese resentment of Japan’s depredations in Manchuria in the 1930s, its atrocities in World War II, and its continued unwillingness to formally acknowledge its guilt for this history (as Germany has long since done).

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While the precise import of renewing and revitalizing JASA is still to be worked out, its various facets are likely to include an expanded role for Japan’s naval forces in protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs) extending from Japan, closer linkages between American and Japanese command, control, and communication (C3) systems, closer coupling of logistic support and maintenance, and collaborative R&D activities perhaps encompassing theater missile defense technologies. (JASA’s role, if any, in the event of a possible Taiwan contingency is likely to be deliberately omitted from the new guidelines.)

Any of these measures, let alone all of them, will heighten previously existing Chinese suspicions that U.S. pronouncements about “engagement” are just empty rhetoric. The term’s inherent ambiguity doesn’t help matters—for example, in one context it implies an abiding commitment of unity, while in another a commitment to combat (recall Napoleon’s dictum about military strategy: “on s’engage, et puis on voit”). Chinese suspicions are not allayed by the fact that the Chinese ideograph most closely approximating the term “engagement” is the same as that which connotes “containment.”

So, from China’s standpoint, the reality of actions provided for or planned in revitalizing JASA contrast unfavorably with the vagueness and elusiveness of the “engagement” rhetoric espoused by the United States.

From the contrasting U.S. standpoint, Japan’s Self-Defense Forces are small in size and limited in capabilities, so upgrading them and linking them more closely to U.S. forward-based forces is amply warranted if Japan is to assume a fairer share of the joint alliance burden. Indeed, Japan’s military spending, at just under 1 percent of GDP compared with over 3 percent in the United States, is the lowest military spending share of any of America’s allies in Asia or Europe. From this standpoint, revitalizing JASA is both legitimate and indeed overdue.

Clearly, these sharply contrasting views are a reflection of the familiar axiom: “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” But the resultant of the different views is that revitalizing JASA collides with “engagement” of China.
This brings to mind a somewhat similar collision between two precepts of U.S. security policy in Europe. There, revitalizing NATO through its eastward “enlargement” to embrace Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic has collided with efforts to improve relations with Russia and to encourage its continued reform and progress. In Europe, the means by which this collision is being cushioned, and perhaps averted, may also have applicability in Asia, notwithstanding major differences between the two regions.

On May 27, 1997, the Secretary General of NATO and Russia’s president signed the “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security between Russia and NATO.” The Act’s principal aims and commitments include: “Development on the basis of transparency . . . of a strong . . . and equal partnership . . . and cooperation to strengthen security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area, refraining from the use of force . . . , mutual transparency in creating and implementing defense policy and military doctrines.”

To pursue these aims, the Founding Act has established a “Permanent Joint Council” (PJC) to meet regularly and to consult on “issues of common interest related to security and stability . . . , arms control, . . . expanded cooperation between the respective military establishments, . . . and developing mutually agreed cooperative projects in defense-related economic, environmental, and scientific fields.”

To be sure, some of this represents rhetoric and symbolism whose implementation lies in the future. However, the precedent can be adapted in Asia to mitigate the conflict between revitalizing JASA on the one hand, and engagement of China on the other.

Toward this end, it would be timely for the United States and China to enter into a compact that might be called “The Enabling Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security between China and the United States” that would envisage establishment of a Permanent Joint Council between China and the United States. The Council’s purposes would include regular consultations on issues of common interest related to security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, exchange of information on planned military exercises, provision of military-to-military exchanges for training and informational activities, transparency in defense policy and defense budgeting, and
consideration of other activities that may be jointly agreed upon by China and the United States.

The forthcoming meeting between Presidents Clinton and Jiang in Washington at the end of October provides an historic opportunity to begin discussions of such an “Enabling Act” and a Permanent Joint Council between China and the United States. As an expression of purpose and intent, inclusion of this subject in the meeting’s agenda and communiqué would represent a major accomplishment even if, as in Europe, translating it into something concrete and effective remains for the future.

It is likely that, in the years ahead, the United States and China will experience frictions and strife between them. Creating such an Enabling Act and establishing a Permanent Joint Council involving the leadership of the PLA and the U.S. military establishment would be valuable contributions toward easing such friction and avoiding misunderstandings in advance of or during possible crisis situations.

Postaudit

*The context of this chapter is somewhat time-bound. However, the general issue of how the United States can and should maintain a (perhaps moving) balance in its relations with a Japanese ally and a sometimes friendly and sometimes less friendly China remains relevant and unresolved.*