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Searching for the "Strategic" in the UK-Japan "New Type of Alliance"

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Philip Shetler-Jones, Brussels-based security consultant, explains that "important policy and strategic developments unfolding in 2015 will test the rhetoric and indicate whether the UK and Japan's relationship has the potential to produce something like a 'new type of alliance'."

Three years on from the 2012 memorandum on defense cooperation, the UK-Japan relationship, which Japan's Ambassador in London Keiichi Hayashi hopefully termed a "new type of alliance," is approaching a turning point. UK Parliamentarian and chair of the Defence Select Committee Rory Stewart opened the RUSI/Sasakawa UK-Japan Strategic Dialogue in January 2015 with an appeal for both parties to be "honest" and "serious" in their discussions and plans. While the Dialogue proceeded in a good natured and industrious atmosphere, it left the impression of a relationship that has taken off successfully but is struggling to achieve escape velocity and attain a level that could truly be called "strategic."

Inter-service cooperation has been a quiet success, especially in the maritime sphere. Partnership on co-development of defense technology is moving ahead, as is consultation on the evolution of Japan's new National Security Council and foreign intelligence service. Nevertheless, three years on from 2012, the rhetoric has shriveled from "alliance" to "partnership." A first "two plus two" meeting in January 2015 set a new high in terms of process, but actually yielded nothing new.

The main factor constraining the level of the UK-Japan relationship is the differential impact of recent geostrategic shifts. China's rise and the US Rebalance simplified Japan's strategic calculus but had the opposite effect on the UK. The Rebalance means Japan can reconcile national defense interests with the strategic imperative of supporting US priorities in Asia, as it did in the Cold War. While PM Abe can claim that "Japan is back," Britain struggles to define a role that reconciles its strategic imperative – alignment with Washington's priorities – with economic realities. Supporting the rebalance means investing in deployable assets, but upsetting Beijing would dent Britain's "prosperity", reducing revenue for defense spending even further.

A thought experiment proposed by a Japanese participant at the January Dialogue illustrates how this divergence limits the UK-Japan relationship: imagine the reaction if Japan had said in response to Russia's moves in Ukraine "both sides must exercise restraint and our economic relations must remain unaffected" – i.e., what Europe essentially says about China's assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific. Another Japanese participant expressed disappointment at the UK's weak response to Beijing's refusal of visas to a parliamentary committee delegation heading for Hong Kong (characterized by the *Wall Street Journal* as London's "kowtow," 20 January 2015), and a US official recently bemoaned Britain's "constant accommodation" of China following London's decision to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Understandably, Japan is not encouraged by what this signals about Britain's sense of balance between self-interest and its principled commitments to liberal values and international law.

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Important policy and strategic developments unfolding in 2015 will test the rhetoric and indicate whether the UK and Japan's relationship has the potential to produce something like a "new type of alliance," or merely one among many cooperative partnerships. On the UK side, the Strategic Defence and Security Review will frame decisions on the role Britain expects to play in the world. Just as Japan's Prime Minister Abe is planning to push ahead with reforms on defense, intelligence and a "pro-active contribution to peace" that could signal a radical departure from Japan's post-1945 profile as a pacifist power, this year's 70th anniversary of WWII will be commemorated in an atmosphere where events in Ukraine and East Asian waters are leading some to doubt the durability of the post-1945 system. If, as expected, Beijing and Moscow jointly promote the narrative of their victory over fascism as a way of legitimizing their continued preeminence in the global order, alternative narratives that emphasize the other lessons of that war will only be heard if they, too, are strategically coordinated.

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When Ambassador Hayashi first spoke in 2013 about the "new type of alliance," he remarked "surely we had the tragedy of another war which we fought against each other and have always to squarely face." It is an irony that as the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII approaches, both Japan and the UK find their strategic vision blurred and complicated by different legacies of World War II.

In Japan, PM Abe struggles to find a message that is true to his personal belief that Japan needs to put the war behind it, but is also broadly acceptable to the nation at large as well as former enemies, some of whom believe that Japan must remain what Jennifer Lind called "a sorry state." The war anniversary does not make it any easier for Abe to achieve his long held ambition of revising the "peace constitution" (or at least its interpretation), allowing Japan to use its military like a normal country, but his response to this challenge indicates a statesmanlike eye for the strategic opportunity. In setting up an advisory committee on the commemoration of the 70th anniversary, Abe has made an explicit connection between war history and the need to project a vision of Japan's place in the world that learns the right lessons from the past.

A more recent war history complicates the task of projecting a vision of Britain's proper place in the emerging world order. The experience in Afghanistan and Iraq tarnished the notion of intervention as a force for good and undermined the assumption that the nation's interests are best served by a reflex response to join in America's wars. As the televised hearings of the Chilcot enquiry into the Iraq War showed, the nation emerged from the "Global War On Terror" era looking for someone to blame. In the prolonged wait for the committee's findings, a series of qualified observers are starting to point fingers. Critical views like that of Frank Ledwidge (author of *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan*), once seen as coming from the political left field, are becoming mainstream. Statesmanship will be in demand also in the UK in 2015 if the Chilcot process is to deliver the catharsis Britain needs to "move on" strategically.

Events in 2015 offer both partners a chance to honestly and seriously face war history, to draw lessons that inform their current role in the world order and move on together. The degree of alignment between London and Tokyo on the larger issues will determine the level of fulfilled ambition for their bilateral relationship. Both parties can learn from each other by developing a joint narrative on their role in the emerging order. If leaders and thinkers take this opportunity to regain public trust and project a coherent vision that balances fundamental values and global interests, this could unburden the UK-Japan relationship, enabling it to reach a truly strategic level.

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