Mil-to-mil relations are strong, but the US needs Japan’s politicians to deliver what they’ve promised.

When Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates was in Tokyo this past January, he admonished the Japanese to do more for their common defense and insisted they render greater support for US forces in Japan.

He persisted in urging Japan’s leaders to resolve the issue of relocating a US Marine air station in Futenma on Okinawa. It has become an open sore in the US-Japan alliance.

Given the scope, complexity, and lethality of the challenges to regional security in Asia, Gates asserted in an address at Keio University, “I would argue that our alliance is more necessary, more relevant, and more important than ever.” To modernize the force posture of the US and Japan, he said, “we need a committed and capable security partner in Japan.”

In response, Prime Minister Naoto Kan a week later delivered an address billed as a major foreign policy statement but that turned out to be laced with platitudes and promised little in support for US forces in Japan. Kan brushed off the turmoil in the relationship with the US, saying: “I think that by now there is little need to speak on this at length.” He did acknowledge US
Japan at a USAF facility, with a joint operations mand unit would be set up next to a Tokyo, a Japanese Air Defense Com-funds. At Yokota Air Base, west of would also be constructed with US US battle command training center and a Japanese Central Readiness Army command post at Camp Zama, returned to the Okinawans. significant parcels of land would be consolidated andOkina-war, and I feel a deep sense of shame at this situation.”

The Futenma dispute has arisen from a realignment of US forces in the Pacific and Asia, beginning in the 1990s, to revise command lines and force structure left over from the war in Vietnam, the Korean War, and World War II. Reducing the presence of US troops and relocating their bases was intended to ease the friction that arises when American troops are stationed on someone else’s sovereign soil.

The recent emergence of China as a potential adversary has lent urgency to the realignment. US forces in Korea are being consolidated and assigned an expeditionary mission and air and naval bases on Guam are being expanded. But efforts to get Japan to contribute more have stalled. The devastating earthquake and tsunami on March 11 has set them back even further.

In 2006, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice joined Foreign Min-ister Taro Aso and Defense Minister Fukushiro Nukaga of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s Cabinet in signing an agreed roadmap to realign US forces in Japan.

Among the roadmap’s initiatives, much of the cost of which was to be borne by Japan, was the movement of a Marine helicopter base from Futenma to the rural town of Henoko on Okinawa, and shifting 8,000 marines and 9,000 dependents from Okinawa to Guam (with Japan paying $6 billion of the $10 billion cost).

After the new helicopter base was constructed and the marines moved to Guam, the remaining US forces on Okinawa would be consolidated and significant parcels of land would be returned to the Okinawans.

Elsewhere in the country, a US Army command post at Camp Zama, south of Tokyo, would be modernized, and a Japanese Central Readiness Force would be posted alongside. A US battle command training center would also be constructed with US funds. At Yokota Air Base, west of Tokyo, a Japanese Air Defense Command unit would be set up next to a USAF facility, with a joint operations coordination center established, with each nation funding its equipment. A US Navy carrier wing would be moved from Atsugi, a crowded town southwest of Tokyo, to a Marine air station in Iwakuni, on the southern tip of Honshu island (with some Marine helicopters moving to Guam). The agreement also stipulated Japan and the US would continue to develop anti-missile defensive capabilities.

After the roadmap agreement, the Army command post at Zama was refurbished and the air defense center constructed at Yokota. Work on most of the initiatives came to a halt, however, when Yukio Hatoyama of the Demo-cratic Party of Japan (DPJ) became Prime Minister in September 2009. By saying he wanted to revisit the roadmap agreement, particularly the relocation of the Futenma helicopter base, Hatoyama in effect reneged on the agreement.

**Okinawa’s Anti-base Movement**

Hatoyama’s stance on the Futenma question gave anti-US activists on Okinawa a wide opening, and they demanded that the Marine air station be removed from Okinawa altogether. Confronted with the Futenma debacle, a financial scandal, and other domestic opposition, Hatoyama lasted nine months in office and was forced to resign in June 2010. Kan, also of the DPJ, replaced him.

Even though the Japanese were jolted by Chinese and North Korean belligerence in recent months, Kan and his government have done little to persuade the Americans that Japan intends to be a reliable ally. “Kan hasn’t done anything to stop the bleeding,” said one American official.

In particular, there is no discern-ible progress on settling the Futenma issue. Kan plans to visit Washington sometime this year but needs to have what the Japanese call an o-miyage, or present, to take with him. It remains to be seen whether the Prime Minister can arrange for one on Futenma.

Looking beyond Futenma, Amer-i-can officials say privately the long-range objective of Okinawa’s anti-base movement is to drive out the US air base at Kadena on Okinawa, home of the 18th Wing, USAF’s largest combat wing and the hub of American airpower in the western Pacific. Nearly 18,000 Americans and 4,000 Japanese employees serve there. “There is no substitute for Kadena,” said an Ameri-can defense official. “But it will be a target if the US and Japanese govern-ments cave in on Futenma.”

Consequently, some Japanese dip-lomats have begun to wonder aloud whether Japan can continue to be a trusted partner in securing US strategic interests in Asia.

American military officers and civil-ian officials have become so exasper-ated they will not discuss Japanese politicians in public and will speak in private only with assurance they will not be named. “The Japanese have got to pull their socks up,” said one senior officer. “They’ve got to spend more on
defense, and they’ve got to take more responsibility for their own security.”

A small but telling point came in the January State of the Union address by President Barack Obama. He mentioned China, India, Russia, South Korea, and 10 other nations—but made no mention of Japan. “Japan is, at best, an afterthought and, at worst, has become a laughingstock following a sequence of hapless prime ministers,” one American officer noted.

American officers, however, are quick to assert military-to-military relations between US forces, particularly US Pacific Command and its Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps components and the Japan Self-Defense Forces, are firm. “It’s a high-maintenance alliance,” said an Air Force officer in Japan, citing cultural and language differences, “but it works.”

As evidence, American officials point to the Japan Air Self-Defense Force’s operations center deep underground in its modern headquarters in the Ichigaya district of Tokyo, where spots are set aside for American liaison officers who will report for duty in a crisis.

Japanese military officers, encouraged in recent years as their nation emerged from the post-World War II pacifist cocoon, express impatience with their political leaders. But they seem resigned to waiting out the current politicians in hopes something better will come along.

Some officers and defense strategists have even rallied around Gen. Toshio Tamogami, who was forced to retire as Chief of Staff of the Air Self-Defense Force in 2008 after he published a controversial essay contending the US war against Japan in 1941 was instigated by President Franklin Roosevelt after he was secretly influenced by Soviet agents.

In the ensuing two years, however, Tamogami has become a popular speaker and writer who has influenced public thinking on security. In a bestselling book published in October, he asserted Japan should establish the right to collective self-defense, assemble sufficient forces to defend itself, and acquire nuclear weapons.

**Outrageous North Korea**

“What is the US strategy in Asia, including Japan?” Tamogami asked. “What is the US going to do with China? And what is the real intention of [the] US in keeping Japan as an ally?”

He contended, “Japan should not just be subordinate to the US but use the alliance for Japan’s national interest, and the first step is to understand American strategy.”

The fundamental problem with the Japanese government is systemic, not partisan politics. From the end of the American occupation in 1952, Japan was governed by a stable “establishment” of politicians led by Shigeru Yoshida, the towering figure of the postwar period, business executives, and government officials.

This consensus lasted until 1993, when Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, the last of the Yoshida deshi, or followers, left office. He was followed by a string of leaders who, with one exception, were in office for only about a year. Japan drifted, as successive governments had no strong foreign policies and spent less than one percent of gross national product on defense, by far the least of any industrial nation.

The exception was Koizumi, who served from April 2001 to September 2006. During his tenure, the roadmap was negotiated with the US, the JASDF sent airlift to Kuwait during the war in Iraq, the ground self-defense force deployed a peacekeeping battalion to Iraq, and the Maritime Self-Defense Force deployed ships to the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf on anti-piracy and refueling duty.

After Koizumi left office, however, those missions were gradually discontinued. Gates, in his January address, sought to revive Japan’s contributions, however modest, to operations outside of Japan. He called on Japan “to take on even greater regional and global leadership roles that reflect its political, economic, and military capacity.”

Gates asserted the deployment of US forces to Japan, which some Japanese want to end, was critical to the common defense. “Without such a presence,” he argued, “North Korea’s military provocations could be even more outrageous or worse. China might behave more assertively towards its neighbors.” Tamogami, the retired general, favors Japan’s alliance with the US but questions whether the US could be counted on to defend Japan in a conflict against China.

“Japan should not be manipulated by those two states,” he said. “Therefore it is necessary to understand American thinking in its security relations with Japan.” He advocates a major buildup in Japanese military capabilities.

“Tamogami was wrong about Japan’s role in World War II,” said an American official who analyzes trends in Japan. “But he was mostly right about what Japan needs to do today.”