The earthquake and tsunami that struck northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011, caused almost unimaginable damage and misery. In a surge of floodwater that lasted just two minutes, Japan lost nearly as many people as a proportion of its population as the United States did during the entire Vietnam War. The subsequent meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear reactors deepened the crisis.

But some see a silver lining to these dark tragedies. After 20 years of economic stagnation, the crisis could bring the Japanese together, catalyze much-needed reforms, and reverse decades of malaise. Many in the United States predict that the disaster will give a welcome boost to the U.S.-Japanese alliance. In an interview with Japan’s national public television network on March 22, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed, “Our alliance, which was already strong and enduring, has become even more so.” Indeed, the U.S. response to the disaster showcased its lasting commitment to Japan, as well as the unique logistical and material capabilities that the U.S. military forces stationed in the Pacific can provide. In what was dubbed Operation Tomodachi (Operation Friendship), the United States

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mobilized some 20,000 service members to assist with relief activities. It was the largest joint operation in the history of the alliance, and it generated widespread public support in both countries.

Despite the warmth of that moment, however, deeper trends portend a far less certain future for the U.S.-Japanese relationship. Japan is undergoing profound changes aimed at empowering the political leadership at the expense of its historically preeminent bureaucracy. But rather than bringing about a clean transfer of institutional authority, the reforms have triggered battles among politicians and between politicians and bureaucrats, creating a power vacuum and undermining the government’s ability to make policy. Complicating matters further are Japan’s piecemeal policymaking institutions, a hypercompetitive media environment, and an increasingly dire fiscal outlook. The result has been uncertainty and gridlock, which are affecting alliance policymaking and are unlikely to disappear in the years ahead.

These hurdles will not cause a fundamental rift in the U.S.-Japanese alliance. But they will make it more complicated, which will require Washington to become more flexible and creative in its dealings with Tokyo. Engaging the new Japan effectively will mean deepening interactions with a wider array of political and nongovernmental actors, including in the media and the private sector, while continuing to work closely with traditional contacts in the bureaucracy. And when Japan’s politics create new roadblocks—as they inevitably will—the United States should explore alternative policies. Safeguarding the U.S.-Japanese alliance must remain a top priority, but Washington should also be prepared to work more closely with other partners in the region.

BEYOND THE “1955 SYSTEM”

There is little question that Japan remains a linchpin of the United States’ strategy in Asia. It is the United States’ fourth-largest trading partner, behind Canada, Mexico, and China. Japan has cooperated with the United States in recent multilateral military efforts, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and in antipiracy activities in the Gulf of Aden, where Japan recently built a small military base. The country is a pillar of the United States’ military presence in
Asia, home to 66 U.S. military bases and 35,000 U.S. airmen, soldiers, sailors, and marines.

Both countries have common interests in the stability of East Asia, freedom of navigation, deterring potential aggressors, and maintaining U.S. involvement in regional affairs. The security environment is evolving rapidly, and demands that both countries be more responsive are rising accordingly. In particular, the continued development of China’s military capabilities will require adjustments. To cite but one example, the United States will need to protect its military installations in Japan and elsewhere in the region against increasingly accurate Chinese ballistic missiles. To do so, it will need to build hardened aircraft shelters, disperse its aircraft over a larger number of bases, and adjust its mix of fighter jets and support aircraft. In the years ahead, these adjustments may require revising long-standing basing agreements and operating practices.

Yet the flexibility necessary to update the alliance is currently in short supply in Japan. The Japanese system of governance remains in the middle of a profound and messy transition. Although these reforms—opening up the political system and strengthening political control over the bureaucracy—may ultimately improve Japan’s policymaking process, in the meantime they have resulted in policy gridlock and confusion. Political reforms are always difficult, but the impasse in Japan’s political system has proved more protracted and disruptive than many observers had predicted.

For most of the years since the end of World War II, Japanese politics had been dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party. The LDP ruled first for 38 years, from 1955 to 1993, and then returned with coalition partners for an encore between 1994 and 2009. During this time, parties fought election campaigns primarily on promises of constituent services, and the LDP’s collusive and sometimes corrupt relationship with the businesses that supplied those services gave it an important advantage.

Meanwhile, under the so-called 1955 system, which dates to the formation of the LDP and its consolidation of power, the bureaucracy enjoyed an extraordinarily strong hand in policymaking. With only a handful of political appointees in the bureaucracy, political oversight was weak at best. Almost by default, bureaucrats drafted most legislation
and defended it on the floor of Japan’s parliament, the Diet. For all its imperfections—and there were many—the 1955 system was predictable and generally responsive to U.S. needs.

Things began to change in the early 1990s, after the economy collapsed and popular anger at government mismanagement grew. Responding to popular demands, Japan’s first (short-lived) non-LDP government since 1955 undertook major electoral reforms designed to make Japanese politics more transparent and competitive. Meanwhile, the number of political appointees in the system was increased, enhancing the power of politicians over the bureaucracy. The government also adopted provisions to ensure that elected officials, not bureaucrats, would defend legislation on the floor of the Diet.

Reforms were slow to take hold, but eventually, a decade later, the Democratic Party of Japan emerged as a viable center-left alternative to the LDP, and change began to accelerate. The DPJ redoubled efforts to assert more political control over the bureaucracy; in its 2009 campaign manifesto, it promised to shift Japan’s political system “from government delegated to the bureaucracy, to politician-led government.” After it won control of the government later that year, the party ended the regular interagency summits of top officials during which policy had once been set without political oversight. The DPJ also sought to strengthen the role of the Cabinet Office, where the chief cabinet secretary coordinates policymaking with representatives from each of the ministries and agencies.

These moves have weakened Japan’s old bureaucratic order, but the politicians’ ability to make policy remains limited. Diet committees are still short on professional staff, and new policymaking offices lack clear mandates and authority. Bureaucrats have pushed back, often successfully, in an effort to retain their prerogatives. And although the number of political appointees in the bureaucracy has risen, the total remains fewer than 100, compared to over 3,000 in the U.S. system. Political volatility—Japan has had six prime ministers in the last five years—has also stunted Japan’s political reform and contributed to policymaking gridlock.

Meanwhile, the country remains hamstrung by ongoing fiscal and budgetary problems. Japan’s public debt now amounts to 225 percent of GDP and by that measure is the highest in the world. And
reconstruction after the earthquake is imposing additional demands on Japanese finances. The country’s defense budgets have long been flat, and Japanese leaders have had to repeal social programs, raise taxes, and make substantial cuts to overseas development assistance as the country struggles to cope with the March 2011 disaster. Japan’s stalled governance reform and intractable fiscal problems are also affecting the U.S.-Japanese alliance. The most obvious instance of that, although by no means the only one, concerns U.S. basing issues.

**BASE WRANGLING**

U.S. bases occupy about 19 percent of the land on the main island of Okinawa, in Japan’s southernmost prefecture. They are also home to about half the U.S. military personnel in Japan, despite the fact that the island accounts for less than one percent of the country’s landmass. The bases there have long been a point of contention between the United States and Japan because of their size, and because of the crime, noise, and safety risks associated with them. In 1995, the United States and Japan entered into negotiations to relocate some U.S. forces off Okinawa and reduce the bases’ burden on local communities.

The Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, in southern Okinawa, was a central part of the negotiations. Since 1945, when the base was built, the surrounding city of Ginowan had grown to the edge of Futenma’s runway, and flights in and out of the base had been posing increasingly large accident risks and noise problems. Highlighting the urgency of the issue, in August 2004, a U.S. Marine Corps helicopter crashed and burned on the grounds of a local university. In 2006, the two sides finally agreed to close the runway at Futenma and open a new one at a base farther north on Okinawa. The move was just one part of a larger transformation designed to relocate some 8,000 U.S. marines from Japan to Guam with Japanese financial support.

Before the plan could be put into action, however, Japan’s new politics intervened. Responding to popular sentiments that Tokyo had for too long played a subservient role in the alliance, the DPJ pledged in its 2009 election campaign to create a “more equal alliance” with the United States. Soon after becoming prime minister, the DPJ’s Yukio Hatoyama reopened the Futenma negotiations, promising to
move the base off Okinawa. To assert his leadership, Hatoyama reportedly excluded bureaucrats from the Foreign and Defense Ministries from taking part in the decision-making. He did not consult them before announcing that he was reopening the Futenma issue, and he barely conferred with them during the subsequent negotiations.

With the bureaucracy sidelined, political infighting in Tokyo soon broke out, both within the three-party DPJ-led governing coalition and between the DPJ and the opposition LDP. By April 2010, when the United States made clear that it objected to renegotiating the deal (and then Chinese provocations gave him more pause), Hatoyama had realized that reopening the negotiations had been a mistake. But by the time he signaled his willingness to back down, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), a member of the governing coalition, was adamant that the base be moved.

As Hatoyama wavered, the SDP’s leader, Mizuho Fukushima, launched a one-woman political campaign against him. She visited Okinawa to seek the support of the prefecture’s governor, Hirokazu Nakaima, against the agreement and lobbied tirelessly in the media for her position. In the end, when Hatoyama made an about-face and came out openly in support of a modified version of the original relocation plan, the SDP left the coalition. Three days later, in early June, Hatoyama announced his resignation. In the meantime, however, Fukushima’s antibase campaign had raised hopes in Okinawa, and it had unwittingly proved that in the new political environment, a small party such as the SDP (which had only 12 members in parliament) could alter the dynamics of an important defense issue.

The local and national politics of the Okinawa basing issue now mix in complicated ways. Nakaima had originally supported the 2006 agreement, but the media spotlight that followed visits to Okinawa by Fukushima and Hatoyama, along with the tough antibase position taken by Nakaima’s opponent in Okinawa’s upcoming gubernatorial election, forced the governor’s hand. He reversed course and came out against the agreement in September 2010. Underscoring the extent of Tokyo’s Transformation for Foreign Affairs.

**U.S. rescue efforts during Operation Tomodachi highlighted the positive role that U.S. forces can play in Japan.**
to which politics overshadowed strategy, Nakaima’s announcement came in the middle of a mounting crisis with China over the disputed Senkaku Islands—precisely a time when the deterrent value of U.S. troops in Japan should have been most apparent.

Where all this leaves the U.S.-Japanese alliance is unclear. At a meeting of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee in June, Japanese Foreign Minister Takeaki Matsumoto, Japanese Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa, U.S. Secretary of State Clinton, and U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates acknowledged that the Futenma runway would not be relocated on schedule. U.S. Marine aircraft will therefore continue to use the base, posing a serious safety risk for the surrounding town. The impending introduction of the MV-22 Osprey, with its early history of technical problems, will only exacerbate local concerns.

The delay in the Futenma move also puts the broader 2006 basing agreement in jeopardy. As Gates said in February, “We really can’t go forward on Guam . . . until we have clarity on what happens on Okinawa.” Futenma is a harbinger of Japan’s increasing unpredictability.

THE PEOPLE’S BUDGET

A second major storm in the alliance is brewing, this one over Japan’s financial support for U.S. forces in the country. Historically, the creation and approval of Japan’s national budget were administrative functions, conducted by the Ministry of Finance. The process was largely invisible to the public. Starting in 2009, the DPJ dramatically increased the transparency of budgeting by introducing so-called budget review panels. The panels are made up of members of parliament and leaders from industry, the media, and academia—few of whom are specialists in the budgetary matters they are being asked to assess. The panels’ rules and procedures are largely improvised, and the proceedings are streamed live over the Internet, at times garnering hundreds of thousands of hits a day.

The panels have improved transparency, but they have also provided a platform for grandstanding in the media. Last year, Renho Murata, a politician and television personality, relentlessly questioned Japanese defense bureaucrats about their spending requirements and managed...
to force the Ministry of Defense to charge admission to army recruitment centers that house combat simulators and other “entertainment” designed to attract recruits. Of the 17 defense budget items reviewed by the panels in the last budget cycle, only one was passed as proposed. The days in which bureaucratic decisions would translate directly into military budgets and policy are long gone.

During the public budget debates in the spring of 2011, the issue of financial support for U.S. forces in Japan, which Japan has been paying since the 1978, became something of a political lightning rod. In 2010, Tokyo provided $3.3 billion to Washington for everything from utilities on U.S. bases to the construction of new facilities on Guam. Some of this money also pays for amenities such as bowling alleys and snack bars, which have become associated with U.S. extravagance. The majority of these funds fall under the category of “host-nation support,” although most Japanese derisively refer to them as “the sympathy budget.” When the United States requested that Japan raise its level of host-nation support during bilateral discussions this January, Japanese defense officials responded with an unusually public rebuttal. Their comments suggested an increasingly zero-sum view of support for the United States, on the one hand, and for Japan’s own military requirements, on the other.

The debate over Japan’s host-nation support was brought to an abrupt close after a Chinese fishing trawler crashed into a Japanese coast guard vessel in September 2010. Following the arrest and detention of the fishermen, the incident escalated into a major diplomatic row with China. As anger toward Beijing grew, Japanese public opinion tipped back in favor of the United States. Early this year, Tokyo agreed to maintain fiscal support for U.S. bases at the 2010 level. Nevertheless, many Japanese government and media sources have indicated that without the crisis with China, financial support would almost certainly have been cut substantially.

The earthquake and tsunami earlier this year are likely to have mixed effects on the debate over Japan’s host-nation support for the United States. On the one hand, U.S. rescue efforts during Operation Tomodachi highlighted the positive role that U.S. forces can play in Japan and reinforced pro-American sentiment. On the other hand, the disaster and the need for reconstruction will surely diminish popular
support for base realignments that would cost Japan billions of dollars. Moreover, positive sentiments toward the alliance cannot address the larger problems in Japan’s policymaking system, the health of which remains crucial to an enduring U.S.-Japanese strategic relationship.

**A Regional Strategy**

The changes in Japanese politics did not begin with, and they will not end with, the 2009 election of the DPJ government or the March 2011 disaster. The U.S.-Japanese alliance, once characterized by relatively predictable bureaucratic interactions, will become increasingly complicated thanks to the vagaries of Japan’s new politics. As the U.S. military adjusts to this new reality, it will need to continue expanding its circle of interlocutors in Tokyo. Operation Tomodachi demonstrated the salutary effects of breaking down the traditional division of labor, in which the U.S. embassy deals with Japanese politicians and bureaucrats while the U.S. military deals with uniformed Japanese officers.

Washington must also begin to tailor its alliance goals in response to Japan’s political priorities and constraints. Conventional wisdom in Washington holds that cooperation will remain difficult as long as the DPJ stays in power. But the DPJ’s early flirtation with China has ended, and the party’s interests overlap with those of the United States in many areas. It openly appreciates the legitimacy of the Japanese military and wants to expand Japan’s ability to conduct international peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. Mainstream Japanese media outlets, for their part, have even discussed reorienting the Japanese Self-Defense Forces as a “global disaster relief force.” The United States should offer equipment and training to support these efforts. At the same time, it should seek to ensure that this does not detract from Japan’s war-fighting capabilities.

The Japanese government is also considering loosening its long-standing restrictions on weapons exports, in the hopes of expanding cooperation with the United States on building high-tech arms, reviving its defense industry, and reducing the costs of developing new weapons systems. Tokyo’s decision in May to allow the United States to export the jointly developed Standard Missile-3 Block IIA,
whose primary purpose is to intercept ballistic missiles, was a positive step in this direction. But the two sides could certainly do more.

Beyond adjusting the way they manage the alliance and finding new areas for cooperation, U.S. strategic planners should also be realistic about how long it may take for a fully functional set of policymaking institutions to consolidate in Japan. As difficult as it will be to reach agreements on the relocation of U.S. bases and other areas of cooperation, implementing those agreements will be even harder.

In the meantime, the United States should decide which bases and assets are most vital. The Kadena Air Base, for example, is particularly critical for deterrence against China and North Korea in Taiwan and South Korea. It also helps with a wide spectrum of other functions, including humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief operations, and provides some of the best access to parts of Southeast Asia. In terms of potential operations in response to a crisis over Taiwan, the closest alternative U.S. air bases are several times the distance away. On the other hand, although the U.S. Marine Corps’ presence in the region is extremely important, its particular location in the western Pacific is less critical, as long as training facilities and infrastructure are adequate. Wherever they are based, the marines would deploy out of garrison for any conceivable mission.

U.S. Senators John McCain (R-Ariz.), Carl Levin (D-Mich.), and Jim Webb (D-Va.) recently proposed moving the U.S. Marine Corps aircraft based at Futenma to Kadena and dispersing other U.S. Air Force assets now at Kadena to Guam or elsewhere in Japan. This proposal is refreshing and creative but problematic. The aircraft at Futenma are primarily transport helicopters designed to support the Marine Corps infantry on the ground in Okinawa; they contribute little to U.S. combat airpower. More important, if moved to Kadena, the U.S. Marine aircraft would occupy space needed for additional fighters, bombers, and combat-support aircraft in the event of hostilities. Alternative solutions to the Futenma impasse should certainly be explored, but this should be done without compromising the Kadena Air Base’s unique benefits.
Nevertheless, it is true that the current U.S. military footprint in Okinawa has long been unsustainable. The United States should continue working to relocate its marines off Okinawa to Guam (or elsewhere), as both sides agreed to do in 2006. This move would entail no significant loss of operational effectiveness in most contingencies, and it would be welcomed in Okinawa, reduce political pressure in Tokyo, and ultimately enhance the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

Japan will continue to be an indispensable U.S. ally, but Washington must remember that the two countries’ relationship is just part of the overall U.S. strategy in Asia. The United States should enhance its arrangements with South Korea, Australia, and other partners in Southeast Asia. Pursuing improved access and basing agreements with these other countries would allow the United States to maintain its most important deployments in Japan while reducing the total size of its footprint there. A more dispersed regional posture would also reduce the vulnerability of U.S. forces and complicate the political and military calculations of potential adversaries.

As Washington reacts to Japan’s political volatility and policymaking gridlock, any proposed changes to the United States’ military presence must also take into account operational considerations and alliance strategy. In making such changes, Washington should not punish—or even appear to punish—Japan for the newfound unpredictability and volatility of its politics. Indeed, it should, on the whole, welcome the changes in governance that will ultimately make Japan more democratic and dynamic. The United States has both national interests in Japan and a moral obligation to support it during tough times, not just flush ones. But in an era when every country’s defense budget faces severe constraints, it is increasingly important for Washington to define its essential goals in Asia and focus its attention and resources accordingly.