Chapter 8
The “Revolution in Military Affairs” and Security in Asia

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Much of the American and international defense community is now taken up with the idea that a historically significant revolution in military affairs (RMA) is underway—quite possibly rivaling the change in warfare that occurred just before, during, and just after World War II. If true, the claim could have many implications for the U.S.–Japan alliance. It could reduce the importance of American bases in Japan, fundamentally affect the dynamics of future U.S.–PRC military competition in uncertain but potentially quite momentous ways, make it hard for Japan to keep up technologically with the American military given Japan’s much smaller defense budget, and shift both countries’ defense priorities even further toward high technology (and away from manpower and ground forces) than they have already been shifted in recent decades. Such shifts could have broad implications for the alliance as a whole, with the most likely net effect being a weakening of its robustness and a diminution of its importance in the years ahead.

This chapter considers several dimensions of the RMA issue of particular relevance for East Asia, and thus of particular interest for this book’s central focus on the future of the U.S.–Japan alliance. Some of the questions are broad; others are more specific. In the first category, it is important to ask at the outset if the RMA hypothesis is basically correct. The chapter next explores whether technology trends will likely complicate allied relations and interoperability efforts by making it difficult for U.S. security partners to keep up with the U.S. armed forces. A final big question is whether trends in military technology, tactics, and strategy will allow—or even require—the United States to scale back its overseas presence in the region. In terms of more practical and immediate issues, the
chapter also asks if trends in military technology are likely to make Theater Missile Defense (TMD) a promising endeavor, and if new technology—as well as innovative applications of existing capabilities and concepts—will allow the United States to reduce the Marine Corps presence on Okinawa without harming combat capabilities, deterrence, or forward engagement.

In answering these questions, this chapter raises serious questions about whether an RMA is underway, but does not rule out the possibility of such a revolution. It suggests that TMD, and national missile defense (NMD) for that matter as well, will become moderately effective against low-technology missile powers such as North Korea, but that TMD and NMD will remain very difficult against more advanced and wealthier countries such as China. It further argues that the so-called RMA should not prevent allied militaries such as Japan’s from being compatible and interoperable with U.S. armed forces, provided that the allies make wise decisions about how to spend their defense resources. Finally, it shows that forward presence will remain quite important—but that it should nonetheless be possible to reduce the number of Marines on Okinawa by at least 50 percent. Part of the purpose in reducing these U.S. forces and bases would be to ensure that Japanese domestic politics will continue to support even more important U.S. bases, such as the Navy and Air Force facilities at Yokosuka, Atsugi, Kadena, Sasebo, and elsewhere. On the whole, therefore, this chapter is somewhat skeptical of the RMA hypothesis and even more skeptical that trends in military technology and tactics will necessarily weaken the U.S.–Japan alliance. For the purposes of this book, this is good news, even if those favoring an RMA may find such a message objectionable.

The Contemporary Revolution in Military Affairs Debate

Due to the excellent performance of American high-technology weapons in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, as well as the phenomenal pace of innovation in the modern computer industry, many defense analysts have posited that an RMA is either imminent or already underway. The RMA thesis holds that further advances in precision munitions, real-time data dissemination, and other modern technologies, together with associated changes in warfighting organizations and doctrines, can help transform the nature of future war and with it the size and structure of the U.S. military. RMA proponents believe that military technology, and the resultant potential for radically new types of warfighting tactics and strategies, is advancing at a rate unrivaled since the 1920s through 1940s, when blitzkrieg, aircraft carriers, large-scale amphibious and