

## Factors Influencing a More Active Security Role for Japan in Asia

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After being defeated in World War II, Japan largely took a back seat in global politics and security, concentrating its efforts on economic development. But recent years have seen greater discussion and consideration not only domestically but internationally of a more active security role for Japan, particularly within Asia.

A range of factors have led to greater debate and shifting attitudes in Japan toward its defence and security policies. These include changes in the global security environment, characterised by the insidious challenges of terrorism, rogue states and weapons of mass destruction, the DPRK and its nuclear program being of particular concern. Also influential is the political, economic and military rise of China and its push to increase its regional influence, including an increasingly aggressive approach to territorial disputes (Fackler, November 2012; *The Japan Times* 9 July 2013). In a tough US economic environment that has seen cuts to even the defence budget, calls from the United States for Japan, as part of its obligations under the US-Japan security alliance, to assume a greater share of the burden of providing for its own defence and to assist in various regional crises have intensified (Logan, 2012).

Underlying all of this is resurgent nationalist sentiment, which has intensified following the return to power after a more than three-year absence of the LDP and the nationalist prime minister Shinzo Abe (Hayashi, 2013). Most recently, Abe has been making increasingly strident statements indicating his willingness to take a more hard line stance in the face of increasingly provocative incursions by Chinese vessels, including military vessels, into

Japanese territorial waters, mainly around the contested Senkaku Islands that are owned and administered by Japan and claimed by China and Taiwan (*Asahi Shimbun*, 13 July 2013). Abe's stance is reflected not only in these statements but also by his oft-stated deep-seated desire to amend Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (Ford, 2013), and his decision in January 2013 to increase Japanese military spending, the first such increase in over 10 years (Soble, January 2013).

Re-evaluation of its security strategies is a far more angst-ridden proposition for Japan than it would be for other countries. Japan's status as a defeated World War II power, victim of the only nuclear devices ever used in conflict, third largest global economy and staunch US ally places it in unique circumstances in terms of how it sees its global security role evolving in response to the changing, challenging security environment. As well, every utterance, policy consideration and action by Japanese politicians is monitored, scrutinised and criticised relentlessly by the Koreans and China, both of whom consider Japan has yet to show sufficient contrition and regret for its wartime actions, and in the case of China, has been used to lend credence to indoctrination of generations of its citizens in hatred of the Japanese that is easily marshalled to whip up nationalistic anti-Japanese vitriol and violence whenever the Chinese government so chooses (Paparella, 5 October 2012).

Nevertheless, since the turn of the century, starting with the Koizumi administration, there has been a subtle shift towards a more pro-active security role for Japan (Green, 15 February 2003). Japan assisted peacekeeping operations in East Timor, and provided logistical and political support for US-led military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Pearson, 22 May 2003), including the dispatch of an Aegis-equipped destroyer to the Indian Ocean (Berkofsky, 19 December 2002). Japan became involved in the group of countries working to achieve a solution to the DPRK nuclear crisis and participated in six-way talks with the DPRK, the United States, the Republic of Korea, China and Russia (*Yomiuri*, 13 August 2003). Koizumi also pushed hard to secure the passage of a suite of security-related legislation, including three war contingency bills (Magnier, 17 May 2003) and a controversial law to allow the dispatch of Japanese Self-Defence Force (SDF) troops to Iraq (*The Age*, 30 July 2003).

Japan has stepped up its security and defence cooperation with Australia, including a Joint Statement on Cooperation to Counter Terrorism, announced during Prime Minister Howard's visit to Tokyo in 2003 (Pearson, 17 July 2003). In July 2011, Japan's Maritime Self

Defence Force opened its first military overseas base since WWII, in Djibouti, primarily to combat piracy in the that region; the base would also, however, enable Japan to play a larger international role in peacekeeping (*The Japan Times*, 5 July 2011). Japan also provided its first military aid abroad since the end of World War II, a \$2 million package to train troops in Cambodia and East Timor in disaster relief skills (Fackler, 2012).

However, despite this recent, greater involvement in regional security issues, and a marked increase in willingness to assume a more robust international posture, there are a number of factors that impact on the extent to which Japan can play an even more active regional security role. Some would appear more intractable than others. All require substantial Japanese effort if they are to be overcome.

## Internal factors

### *The Japanese Constitution and domestic legislation*

How the US-drafted post-war Japanese constitution, and in particular Article 9, is interpreted is a highly politicised issue, heavily influenced by the prevailing public feeling. In its original interpretation, Article 9 prohibits Japan from maintaining a military and from exercising the right to collective self-defence.

Despite the Japanese public being strongly pacifist, until recently, there was not sufficient appetite within the populace to support the removal or re-wording of Article 9 (Fackler, November 2012) to allow the country's de facto military, the Self-Defence Forces (SDF), to be normalised (Hayashi, 2013) and so play a greater international security role. However episodes of nationalism-fuelled anti-Japanese demonstrations in China targeting Japanese businesses and products (Huang, 2012) and more frequent, brazenly provocative incursions of Chinese vessels, including military vessels, into Japanese territorial waters has seen a shift in the public mood, which now appears more accommodating to a change to Article 9 (Ford, 2013; Fackler, 2012) to explicitly establish a Japanese military that is able to play a bigger international role (Hayashi, 2013). In July 2012, a report by a panel of government-appointed experts called for the lifting of Japan's self-imposed ban on exercising the right collective self-defence, a call supported by the United States but criticised by China and South Korea (*The Japan Times*, 20 July 2012).

The Constitution also limits Japan's use of arms abroad to situations in which the SDF is

under direct attack and bans the use of force overseas as well as collective self-defence (*The Japan Times*, 9 September 2011). Japan's ban on weapons exports under the three principles regarding arms exports established in 1967, which was relaxed in 1983 to allow the supply of weapons technology to the United States and in 2004 to allow joint development and production of missile defence systems with other countries (*Japan Times*, 9 September 2011), also limited to a degree the international security role Japan could play, and in 2011 the government further relaxed the ban, opening the way for Japanese companies to participate in the international development and manufacture of advanced weapon systems (Dickie, *Financial Times*, 27 December 2011).

### ***Domestic Politics***

Domestic political appetite for a more militarily participative Japan, while still lacking in some quarters, particularly in relation to the nuclear question, has been increasing, particularly in light of military moves by China and North Korea in recent years (Ford, 2013; *The Japan Times*, 21 February 2011).

With the assumption of a nationalist conservative to the top job, bolstered by his LDP regaining control of both houses of parliament, conditions appear ripe for the implementation of a policy agenda permitting more assertive employment of Japanese defence resources.

One restraining factor amongst all this is the presence of the pacifist Komeito as the LDP's coalition partner (*The Japan Times*, 7 January 2013). Komeito is unlikely to permit the kind of *carte blanche* on national security and defence matters that the nationalistic Abe might be seeking, but the overwhelming support of the polity for the LDP's policy agenda could give it sufficient sway to force the Komeito to be more accommodating.

### ***Pacifism and Japanese attitudes towards the SDF***

Scarred by the war experience, their thinking since then influenced by the pacifist constitution (Ford, 2013; *Emmott, Survival*, June-July 2012), the Japanese public has shied away from any semblance of an internationally active Japanese military (*The Economist*, 14 April 2012). Japanese have had a somewhat ambivalent or even tense attitude towards the SDF, knowing that it is a de-facto military force but one that because of constitutional restraints is neither allowed to call itself one nor function like one, instead restricting its activities to assisting rescue operations in the event of natural disasters and accidents (Traphagan, 2012) and operating under the government's five principles for sending SDF

personnel overseas as part of UN peacekeeping activities (Ito, *The Japan Times*, 2 November 2011).

The active and early involvement of SDF forces, working together with US troops, in rescue operations immediately following the 2011 Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami was highly evaluated by the Japanese public and could be said to have boosted significantly public support for a more “muscular military” (Hayashi, 2013; *The Japan Times*, 19 March 2012).

Heightened regional tensions, particularly vis-à-vis China have also seen the public become more accepting of the SDF taking a role in defending Japanese interests, (Hayashi, 2013) a role that, given changing attitudes of other countries in the region in response to increasing Chinese maritime aggression in the East and South China Seas, could conceivably be expanded to cover waters outside Japan’s in support of these countries.

Further, there appears to be growing support within the government for an expansion of the SDF’s role, with a government panel interim report released in July 2011 saying: “the nation should re-examine its principles and capacities to broaden SDF participation in peacekeeping operations to include core activities, such as truce monitoring” (*The Japan Times*, 5 July 2011).

### ***Japanese economy and demographics***

The Japanese economy has been mired in an economic slump for more than 20 years. Deflation, corporate restructuring, non-performing bank loans and huge government debt has dampened economic activity and produced anaemic growth. Just as Japan started to emerge from this stagnant state, the March 2011 Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami devastated the Tohoku economy and had a severe detrimental impact on the national economy too.

On top of this, Japan faces large financial demands in dealing with its aging population and shrinking workforce. By 2040, it will have around 40% fewer citizens under 15 and a 30% lower working age population, which will place additional pressure on the economy and pension and health systems. Japan’s aging society also means fewer workers to produce defence items and a shrinking fighting age population to serve in the SDF, limiting its capacity to take up a greater role in the region (Logan, 2012).

The effect of this negative economic environment had precluded any significant increase in defence spending. Japan spends roughly 1% of its GDP on defence, compared to the United States' 4% (Logan, 2012). The advent of 'Abenomics', however, has renewed hope that Japan will be able to break out of deflation and get its economy moving again in a meaningful way. Within this environment of positive economic sentiment, Abe's announcement of an increase in defence spending (Spitzer, 2013) was welcomed as long overdue not only domestically but also overseas (Freedberg Jr, 2013).

Within this environment of more positive economic sentiment (and reflecting Abe's hawkish tendencies), the Japanese government's annual defence report for 2013 was notable for two reasons: it marked the first increase (a modest but symbolically significant 0.8%) in defence spending in years and was frank and specific in presenting concerns relating to China's military build up and increasingly provocative activities in Japanese territorial waters (Soble, January 2013) that could lead to a "contingency situation" (Sonoda, 2013).

## External factors

### *Views of East Asian neighbours*

The legacy in East Asia of Japanese colonialism and wartime aggression is suspicion and unresolved historical antagonism towards Japan (Khalilzad, Orletsky, Pollack, Pollpeter, Rabasa, Shlapak, Shulsky and Tellis, 2001, p11). Many of these neighbours feel that Japan is still to fully come to terms with its wartime aggression, and are wary of Japan's desire to take greater security responsibility in the region, given Japan's obvious capacity to rapidly become a military power again should it choose to (Yahuda, 1996, p 263). Japan's cause has not been helped by the ill-advised public remarks of senior national and regional politicians such as Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto, who appeared to justify Japan's use of 'comfort women' in World War II and Abe's misstep of seeming to seek the modification/retraction of the Kono apology (*Asahi Shimbun*, 30 September 2013; *Asahi Shimbun*, 1 February 2013).

Japan places great importance on maintaining good regional relationships and would be reluctant to endanger relations by pursuing a more activist security role in the region, unless the regional security environment grew so grave as to seriously risk Japanese homeland security. China's increasingly frequent incursions into Japanese territorial waters and provocative actions such as 'targeting' of Japanese vessels (*The Japan Times*, 9 July 2013) run the risk of bringing events ever closer to crossing the line that could lead to the outbreak

of hostilities particularly given Prime Minister Abe's stated willingness to actively defend Japanese territory and waters.

### ***Security relationship with the United States***

Under Japan's security relationship with the United States, established by the 1951 US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty and the 1960 Treaty for Mutual Cooperation and Security (McDougall, 1997, pp 36, 59), the United States acts as guarantor of Japanese security, thus removing the need for Japan to maintain a fully-equipped independent military (George Mulgan, 1997, p 142). This 'free riding' was and is still, to some extent, encouraged by the United States (Logan, 2012). In the past it has been argued that Japan's status as a US protectorate has acted to stunt Japan's political development such that it is ill-equipped to engage more fully in regional security debate and activity (George Mulgan, 1997, p 140).

At the same time as removing the need for Japan to maintain an 'normal' military force and thus lessening Japan's ability to play a larger security role in the region, the US alliance is also the source of pressure for Japan to make a more active security contribution, such as by putting "boots on the ground" during the Gulf War (*The Japan Times*, 22 June 2012) and in Iraq (*The Economist*, 10 July 2004).

In January 2010, on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Japan-US Security Treaty, US Ambassador to Japan John Roos noted that the relationship needed to evolve to ensure the continuing vitality and strength of the alliance and that both sides needed to continue to look for ways to enhance their alliance capabilities, such as expanding collaboration in areas including intelligence cooperation and missile defence (*Asahi Shimbun*, 18 January 2010). In January 2011, Japan and the United States signed an agreement extending by five years host-nation financial support to help cover part of the costs of stationing US forces in Japan under the bilateral security arrangement (*The Japan Times*, 21 February 2011). In February 2010, the United State proposed that the SDF maintain a permanent presence on Guam to reinforce Japan-US disaster response training (Roos, *The Japan Times*, 13 May 2011).

Despite this, Japan-US strategic dialogue "remains underdeveloped", with political tensions over the Futenma Marine Air Station in Okinawa being a major factor (Smith, April 2012).

### ***Japan and the UNSC***

Although Japan has been an increasingly active player on international security issues, including in the area of peacekeeping, the extent to which it can play a role in addressing global security concerns is limited by it not being a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Given the level of its UN contributions and its contribution to various peacekeeping missions, Japan believes that it is deserving of a permanent seat in any enlarged UNSC (*The Economist*, 16 April 2004), and recent years have seen a renewed push by Japan, as part of the 'Group of Four', which also includes Brazil, India and Germany, for permanent UNSC membership, so far to no avail. The initiative is part of a broader effort on UNSC reform. Japan has been campaigning for an increase in the number of permanent and non-permanent members, with options including establishing a longer-term category of membership that carried the possibility of conversion to permanency after a certain period of time (*The Japan Times*, 5 July 2012).

Japan has struggled to define its national interests and responsibilities and a role for itself on the post-Cold War international security stage. It has made concerted and often painstaking efforts over recent years to make a greater contribution to regional security. However, internal and external constraints have real potential to block further expansion of Japan's regional security role, and will require careful management of domestic and international sentiment by the Japanese Government to overcome.

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