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Japan's Security and Defence Policies: Issues, Trends and Prospects

Is Japan planning to turn into a regional military hegemon prepared to defend its regional interests with military force if 'necessary' as it was feared amongst a minority of analysts and observers of Asian security in recent years?

The answer is fairly simple and much less spectacular than a few alarmists – many of whom may be found amongst Chinese scholars and policy-makers – have argued. Japan is as far away as ever from turning into a regional military bully and its defence and security policies will remain exclusively defence-oriented and decisively nonaggressive. In fact, there is very little impetus for an alteration to current Japanese regional policy – its ties with China have been good, defence spending is capped, and, there is little chance of an alteration to its militarily restrictive constitution.

The Trouble with North Korea

With regard to Japan's relationship with North Korea, the two countries remain as far away as ever from anything resembling the normalization of bilateral relations. This lack of détente is largely due to two key issues: (1) the 'abduction issue' (as it is referred to in Japan); and (2) North Korea's nuclear programme.

During the 1970s and 1980s, North Korean secret service agents abducted up to 100 Japanese citizens to, among other reasons, 'employ' them as language 'instructors' that would teach the Japanese language to their own secret service agents. While Pyongyang freed some of the abducted citizens a few years ago, Tokyo insists on obtaining information on the fate of those Japanese citizens who were not allowed to return after decades in North Korean captivity. Pyongyang for its part will continue to ignore these requests insisting that the issue has been settled once and for all with an official North Korean apology during the Koizumi-Kim summit in Pyongyang in 2002.

Shooting Down Missiles

At present, and with increased intensity, Japan is preparing to defend itself better against an – admittedly, very unlikely – North Korean missile attack by jointly working with the U.S. on the development and deployment of a regional missile defence system. Tokyo and Washington have started working on developing a missile defence system since North Korea launched a missile over northern Japan in 1998.

Currently, hundreds of North Korean missiles are reportedly aimed at Japan (and South Korea for that matter) and it is estimated that Pyongyang's Taepodong missiles have only a 7-8 minute flight-time to downtown Tokyo.

Although the Japanese government has portrayed the North Korean missile development as a threat, it is possible to argue that this assessment may be exaggerated. North Korean missile tests of recent years have had a high failure rate – leaving many to doubt whether Pyongyang's missiles do, in fact, constitute a real threat in the first place.

Either way, for years the U.S. has urged Japan to increase its contributions to the

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costly development of a regional missile defence system. After dragging its feet and maintaining that it was, above all, interested in the research phase and not necessarily in the development phase of the project, Tokyo in 2007 officially committed itself to financially contribute to the development phase of the system.

In December 2007, a Japanese warship stationed off Hawaii launched a U.S.-developed Standard-3 interceptor missile and successfully destroyed a mock target fired from onshore. Success here marked the long-awaited progress of the development of the system. Land-based Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3) missile defence systems have already been installed at two bases in Japan and further installations are planned in the years ahead. Further tests are expected to follow in the coming months. Ultimately, Japan plans to install missile interceptor systems on four of its destroyers equipped with the state of the art Aegis tracking system.

While China considers the system to be aimed at diminishing China's missile deterrence capabilities, U.S. and Japanese policymakers maintain that the system will be deployed to protect Japanese territory along with US soldiers stationed in Japan from North Korean rogue missiles.

Worried about China?

As in previous years, Japan's Ministry of Defence has once more referred to China as a "potential military threat" in the latest edition of its White Book on defence.

However, Japan publishing its worries about the rapid modernization of China's armed forces has by now become a yearly exercise with realistically very little relevance for Japan's China policies. Japan will not boost up its military capabilities because the Chinese economy that funds its defence spending is experiencing double-digit growth rates every year. China remains an important investment destination for Japanese businesses (roughly 10.000 Japanese companies operate in China employing more than 10 million Chinese workers) and bilateral trade amounted to more than $230 billion in 2007.

Before becoming Prime Minister, Taro Aso repeatedly expressed concern in public over China's rising defence budget. However, after taking office a few weeks ago, he seems to be prepared to continue implementing a pragmatic policy towards China in view of soaring trade relations and business ties. Moreover, Mr. Aso has not yet 'threatened' to visit the controversial Tokyobased Shintoist Yasukuni Shrine, the last resting place to a number of convicted Japanese A-class war criminals from World War II. Instead, Mr. Aso will reportedly meet with Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao when attending the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Beijing on October 24 and 25 and, judging by official Japanese-Sino meetings in 2007 and 2008, it is likely that potentially controversial issues, such as Yasukuni and territorial disputes, will not feature too prominently (if at all) on the agenda of the upcoming Japanese-Chinese encounter.

Sino-Japanese disputes over territories in the East China Sea are very likely to remain unresolved for some time to come. However, recently Tokyo and Beijing showed willingness to seek a mutually beneficial solution, including the joint exploration of natural gas and oil around the waters Japan refers to as 'Senkaku Islands' and China as 'Diaoyu Islands.'

The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance

Japan is hosting 53,000 U.S. troops on Japanese soil and Tokyo's regional security strategies will continue to be defined and limited by its defence ties with the U.S. Ironically, this will continue to both worry and appease Japan's neighbours.

On the one hand, they will worry as Tokyo remains as vulnerable as ever to U.S. pressure (referred to in Japanese as gaiatsu) to support and assist the implementation of U.S. security policies in East Asia. On the other hand, Japan's neighbours will also be appeased as (above all from a Chinese perspective) continued U.S. military presence on Japanese soil will continue to be under-

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stood as a guarantee that Tokyo does not engage itself in any 'go-it-alone' defence and security policies which could potentially be perceived as threatening by its neighbours.

Fears of Japanese regional security policy shifting from defensive to offensive should the U.S. one day withdraw its troops from Japan appear unfounded. Though Japan is a regional military power, it does not exhibit expansionist ambitions in Asia and, unlike others in Asia (above all China which in 2008 announced a further 17% rise of its defence spending) Japan has reduced its defence budget over recent years. Furthermore, unlike other major powers (above all again China but also, of course, the U.S.), Japan has limited its defence spending to 1% of its GDP. Given Japan's enormous GDP this nevertheless translates into an annual Japanese defence budget of $42 billion as compared to roughly $59 billion China spent on defence in 2008.

Operating in the Indian Ocean and the Middle East

Authorised by the 2001 "Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law", the Japanese navy has been refuelling Coalition vessels engaged in the war in Afghanistan since November 2001. The law was extended several times over recent years, the last time in January 2008 when then-Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda had to use the ruling Liberal-Democratic Party's (LDP) party's two-third majority in the Lower House to override the opposition's Upper House veto in a time-consuming and controversial law-making process.

This move by Mr Fukuda was considered controversial as it was the first time in post-war Japan that the ruling LDP had to use a two-third majority in the Lower House to override a veto in the Upper House. The Japanese Constitution stipulates that this practice is reserved for "national emergencies" and the political opposition (as well as Japan's liberal and left-leaning media) contested the argument that the continuation of the Japanese mission in the Indian Ocean constituted a "national emergency".

The bill was adopted regardless and in the Cabinet's last working session in mid-September, then outgoing Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda's Cabinet approved the bill. The bill commits Japan to contribute to the U.S.-led fight against terrorism in Afghanistan for another year beyond the 15 January 2009 deadline. Nevertheless, securing yet another extension of the law through parliament is likely to be as difficult and time-consuming as it was in January 2008.

Leaving the Middle East

Authorized by the 2003 "Special Measures Law on Humanitarian Assistance and Reconstruction of Iraq", the Japanese Air Self-Defence Forces (ASDF) and Ground Self-Defence Forces (GSDF) were dispatched to the Middle East in support of the U.S.-led coalition forces in January 2004.

While the roughly 1000 ground forces left southern Iraq in July 2006, the ASDF has remained stationed in Kuwait transporting supplies and members of the militaries of other nations as well as those of the United Nations between Kuwait and Iraq. The ground forces' mission in southern Iraq has consisted of the provision of medical and humanitarian aid for the Iraqi population as well as the reconstruction of infrastructure, roads, and hospitals.

Although the mission has been considered to be successful, it was not free from problems and controversy – largely due to constitutional restraints imposed on Japanese military troops operating in Iraq. Constitutional restraints meant that the Japanese mission was to be strictly of a noncombat nature and engagement limits were defined strictly for individual self-defence – as opposed to defending each other or the military personnel of other countries. As such, other Coalition forces were tasked with protecting Japanese troops and their base.

Earlier this September, the Japanese government announced the termination of ASDF transport operations between Kuwait by the end of the year following a recent request by the Iraqi government for a re-

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duction in the presence of foreign military forces.

Not Revising the 'Peace Constitution'

The current status quo whereby Japan maintains armed forces although legally (through Article 9 of Japan's Constitution) it is not permitted to do so in the first place, is very likely to continue.

Indeed, a constitutional revision – which has been called for by Japan's conservative and ultra-conservative politicians and editorial writers for more than a decade – is unlikely to happen any time soon. A two-third majority in both chambers of the Japanese parliament is required to change the constitution and such a majority is realistically a near impossibility given the current political environment in Japan.

This unlikely two-third majority in both chambers of parliament would then have to be supported by the electorate in a referendum. Though Japanese voters have increasingly leaned towards a constitutional revision per se, survey data has shown that the majority of the public would not vote for the abolition of Article 9 of the Constitution.

Consequently, the revision of Article 9 will continue to remain a moot issue in the years ahead.

...and Not Going Nuclear Either

An equally moot point (and equally vividly discussed, especially when North Korea conducted what was back then to be believed its first nuclear test in October 2006) is the possibility of Japan developing and deploying nuclear weapons.

Undoubtedly, Japan would be able to go nuclear within a very short period of time. Realistically, however, there are no indications that Japan is considering the possibility of equipping itself with nuclear weapons since it enjoys a U.S. nuclear umbrella instead.

Enter Taro Aso

Newly-elected Prime Minister Taro Aso is in favour of changing the government's interpretation of the pacifist Constitution to allow Japan's armed forces to exercise the right to collective self-defence as formulated in Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Under the current interpretation, Japan acknowledges the right to collective self-defence, that is, the de facto right to participate in international military operations, but sees itself incapable of executing it in view of Article 9 of Japan's constitution.

The issue of collective self-defence has been discussed in Japan for years but it is realistically very unlikely that Aso and likeminded LDP lawmakers will be able to change the current official interpretation any time soon. Not even former Prime Minister Koizumi, whose tenure as head of government from 2001-2006 was accompanied by solid LDP majorities in both chambers of the Japanese parliament, was able to revise the official interpretation. Instead, he was confronted with strong resistance from the opposition as well as from members of his own party throughout his entire tenure.

Although Aso has articulated that his government will seek to adopt a permanent law authorizing the deployment of Japan's Self Defence Forces without seeking parliamentary approval for each mission, this is much easier said than done. The Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) solid majority in the Upper House ensures that the adoption of such a law can be delayed or blocked.

Conclusion

The scope for substantial changes of Japan's regional and global security policy agenda remains very limited. Even if Prime Minister Taro Aso might become tempted to add assertiveness and outspokenness to Japanese foreign and security policy debates in the months ahead, Japan's actual security will not change in substance.

Tokyo's involvement in developing a regional missile defence system with the U.S. will not turn Japan's defence and security

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policies from defensive to offensive although Tokyo and the U.S. will nonetheless continue to be confronted with this criticism. Such a system is, as described, a defensive system that is at best capable of rendering other countries' ballistic missile arsenals ineffective and (from their viewpoint) obsolete at worst.

Japanese contributions to international military missions will continue to be limited to strictly non-combat missions and the absence of a permanent law in place authorizing the deployment of Japanese military to international missions will make sure that Japan's participation in international peacekeeping or peace-enforcement missions will remain the exception rather than the rule.

What's more, in the months ahead, defence and security policy issues are unlikely to make it to the top of Japan's policy agenda, not least because of domestic economic and political issues and problems, including the prospect of Japanese general elections by the end of this year.

The current financial crisis and the threat of economic recession in Japan, too, will do their bit to put defence and military issues in Japan onto the backburner, at least for the time being.

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