



The Case for Japanese National Security Independence: A Possible Future Imperative

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Abstract

Japanese defence, security and foreign policy has always been adaptable and flexible such that Japan has traditionally been able to not only survive but thrive in the international system. This has been due to Tokyo's leadership being cognizant of the power structures in international relations and correspondingly being able to ally herself with the most suitable hegemon while pitting herself against weakening adversaries. Apart from Japan's unequivocal defeat in World War Two where Tokyo drastically miscalculated in making an enemy of the US, her defence and foreign policy has served her well and upheld the prime Asian status of the Land of the Rising Sun for much of contemporary history.

However, with the end of the Cold War, the possible weakening of US resolve and economic strength to remain committed in Asia and the rise of China among other factors, the Japanese grand strategy of relentless economic development and minimal attention to military policy whilst sheltering under the US-Japan military alliance as enunciated under the Yoshida Doctrine needs to be rethought. Basically, Tokyo has to strike a balance between adhering to the limits imposed upon Japan's military strength by her pacifist constitution while retooling the Japanese Self-Defence Forces and adapting her defence and security policy to better confront and deter threats from both state (China and North Korea) and non-state actors (terrorism). Towards this end, the adoption of the Japanese crane as a mascot to symbolise a benign, flexible and capable approach to Japanese national security is proposed.

Introduction

Like Japan's adaptation to Western superiority from the mid-1800s with the arrival of Commodore Perry's warships to the early 1940s where Tokyo marshalled all the national emotional and material assets to make Japan the preeminent Asian power, Japanese post WWII foreign policy has been a successful exercise in flexibility. However, the end of the cold war, cessation of the bi-polar international structure dominated by the US and USSR, China's rise and the possible weakening of US preponderance favour a change in Japan's foreign policy away from one that follows the Yoshida doctrine of maximum economic devotion coupled with minimum attention to national defence [1] (Pyle, 2007, pp. 242) to one where

Japan adopts a more assertive and capable military/foreign policy. Hence, we shall examine the possible external threats against Japan, analyse the possibility of US retrenchment from East Asia and discuss the rationality of independent Japanese defence and security policy.

Existing Perspectives and Proposed Analytical Approach

To analyse current thought in Japanese security policy and ensure originality, I have selected four articles/books which broadly represent conventional views regarding Japanese defence and security policy and Sino-Japanese relations. Regarding Tokyo's security policies, *Japan's Reluctant Realism: Foreign Policy Challenges in an Era of Uncertain Power* by Green [2] provides a good overview of Tokyo's choice towards either a more conventional foreign policy with greater involvement in collective security or a neutralist policy with Japan being comfortable with her position but less involvement in international security. The importance of Asia, constitutional revision and the decreasing utility of the US-Japan alliance to Japan are also discussed. Additionally, *Japan Re-emerges as a 'Normal' Military Power* by Hughes talks about Tokyo's security strategy after the post-Vietnam War marginal US retrenchment from Asia and the expansion of the Japanese security environment via the Sato-Nixon communique of 1969. Tokyo's formulation of the National Defence Programme Outline (NDPO) leading to the qualitative build-up of Japanese forces and the explicit responsibility of the Japan Self-Defence Force (JSDF) to defend Japan is discussed along with Japanese resistance to collective self-defence and how this is being worked around to assist the US led war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

However, these two sources and others similar to them do not elaborate on how extensively China might negatively affect Japan's geostrategic interests (Senkakus, Spratlys to seize energy resources and consequently disrupt Japanese Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC)...etc), the possible waning of US deployment in Asian due to economic constraints and how Japan can better protect her national security interests in future.

As for Sino-Japanese relations, *China and Japan's simmering rivalry* by K. E. Calder describes salient issues that would generate conflict between China and Japan but offers no elaboration as to the conditions under which Japan should take a more autonomous role in her security. Subsequently, *China, the US-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia* by Christensen [3] also discusses issues which could provoke Sino-Japanese disputes and scratches the surface about Chinese hegemonic tendencies, thereby hinting at why Tokyo should more actively pursue national security goals. However, the detailed extent of Chinese foreign policy revisionism and its threat to Japanese national interest is unexplored while how and why the US commitment to Asia might weaken is unexamined.

Considering the above, this work seeks to apply a Realist framework to the analysis of Japan's current geostrategic environment, outline the external challenges to her vital national interests, explore the probability of waning future US involvement in East Asia even as the Obama administration implements a US military "pivot" towards Asia and argue for more independent Japanese security provision.

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Received: July 12, 2012 Accepted: August 16, 2012 Published: August 24, 2012

Theoretical Underpinnings

Realism posits that due to the unregulated and conflictual nature of international relations and the paramount value of national survival, national security is chiefly secured by power [4] (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 2001, pp.63-98). Essentially, the violent nature of the Realist world treasures power and regards it as the means to fend off or defeat state adversaries. Therefore, the principle of self-help and the importance of the balance of power amongst nations for evaluating relative national survival is stressed.

Next, a derivative of classical Realism is *Defensive Neorealism* which posits that instead of seeking more power than rival states, states should instead strive to minimise power loss relative to their adversaries. Survival is thus achieved by seeking security rather than greater power. A chief means of doing this is through alliances which balance against the opposing state or by undertaking security strategies which reassure potential adversaries, hence reducing the latter's need to accumulate power for national security [5] (Taliaferro, 2000-2001, pp. 129). Thus, instead of building greater capabilities than its enemies, the defensive neorealist adopts other strategies to prevent or persuade opposing states from increasing their relative power.

Concerning the post-Cold War era, we can see that an ascendant China seeking to expand her influence makes classical Realism applicable. For instance, a Chinese navy nuclear submarine intruded into southern Japanese waters in 2004 whilst in 2005, the number of Chinese military air incursions into airspace claimed by Japan spiked [6] (Calder, 2006, 5th Paragraph). These hints of Chinese military assertiveness are arguably meant to establish claims to energy resources in the waters near Okinawa and fits the Realist template of power based inter-state competition. As for Defensive Neorealism, the maintenance of artificially low defence spending capped at 1% of yearly Gross National Product (GNP) coupled with reliance on the US to help defend Japan since the *Security Treaty Between the United States and Japan*¹, signed in 1951 has helped reassure Japan's rivals that balancing against Japan is unnecessary.

The Key Geostrategic Threats to Japan

Absent the US as an anarchy reducer, China, North Korea/Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and piracy/terrorism become serious Japanese security concerns.

The People's Republic of China (PRC)

Historically, China was Asia's hegemon and it can be argued that with its dynamic economy, it once again seeks to re-establish its hegemonistic status. However, China's intent can be seen earlier in 1974 when it seized the Paracel Islands from Vietnam even though the islands were equidistant from Chinese and Vietnamese soil, giving both states equal claim.

As for recent evidence of PRC expansionism under the guise of reclaiming national territory, in 1994 China built temporary structures on Mischief Reef which is about 130 miles from Philippine soil and well within the Exclusive Economic Zone or EEZ² (200 miles from national coastline) of the Philippines. While Mischief Reef is in international waters since territorial waters only extend 12 miles from national coastlines, the Philippines has more claim to the reef since the nearest Chinese landmass is over 700 miles to the north. Additionally, since the Philippine Navy and Air Force use outdated equipment and are unable to project force to exert Manila's claim

over the entire Spratly Islands (of which Mischief Reef is a part of), the PRC, which has superior naval and air forces has bullied the Philippines by exerting *de facto* control of Mischief Reef with the building of permanent structures on the reef in 1999 [7] (McCarthy, 8th March 1999, Time World).

Lastly, China's hegemonistic intent is proven with its "9 Dotted Line" territorial claim to much of the South China Sea which would give Beijing authority over the energy resource rich Spratly Islands and command of Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOC) adjacent to Vietnamese, Philippino and Malaysian national waters. According to Associate Professor Peter Dutton of the US Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute, "Chinese domestic law claims sovereignty over all of the islands in the South China Sea and also claims territorial seas and EEZs emanating from all of its claimed territories" [8] (Brown, 8th December 2009, Asia Times Online).

Therefore, with China's revisionist strategy in the South China Sea which emphasises "might as right" in the regional politico-military balance of power³, Tokyo should maintain a vigilant eye on Chinese actions towards the Japanese administered but Chinese claimed Senkaku islands which like the Spratlys, are also situated close to oil and gas deposits. Indeed, the PRC has mounted numerous maritime and air incursions into the waters around and airspace over the Senkakus in recent times with the latest incursion being on 16th March 2012 when two PRC patrol vessels sailed near the Senkakus in an attempt to exert Chinese sovereignty (Mainichi Daily News, 17th March 2012). Utilising a Realist interpretation of this dispute, we can infer that one of the main reasons why China has not attempted to seize the Islands is because the qualitatively superior JSDF stands ready to repel any attempt.

North Korea

North Korea is not a conventional threat. While she maintains a 950,000 man army, it is equipped with obsolete equipment while the DPRK navy is incapable of projecting force against Japanese maritime interests nor transporting invasion forces to Japan [9] (Bechtol, 2010, pp. 16-17, 26). As for North Korea's Air Force, its ageing warplanes are unable to meaningfully attack Japan [9] (Bechtol, 2010, pp. 24-25).

But despite this, North Korea remains a dangerous foe based on her missile forces and asymmetric warfare capability. Regarding the former, she is estimated to possess 1000 ballistic missiles (Kim, 17th March 2010, Reuters) of which a significant proportion would probably be of the *Nodong* model which has a 1300-1500 km range

¹*Security Treaty Between the United States and Japan; September 8, 1951*, The Avalon Project – Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, sourced from http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/japan001.asp on 13 April 2012.

²While EEZs are mostly in international waters, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea or UNCLOS gives a sovereign state the sole right to exploit the resources present within its EEZ while guaranteeing freedom of passage to international shipping. Additionally, some states deploy naval forces to protect economic operations in the EEZ and this leads to de facto administrative control of the surrounding international waters. The economic rights of a state in its EEZ can be found at *Preamble to the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea, Part V, Exclusive Economic Zone*, sourced from http://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part5.htm at 13 April 2012.

³It can be seen that China has a tendency to victimize weaker states and leave stronger rivals alone. For instance, in the Spratly Islands dispute, China has seized Mischief Reef from the Philippines but has left Taiwanese claimed islands alone possibly because of Taiwan's first rate navy and air force.

and can thus threaten Japan [9] (Bechtol, 2010, pp. 28). Even a modest attack of 100 missiles, (assuming that 50% were shot down by anti-missile systems) would result in substantial casualties and a psychological wound that Japan could not defend herself against a third world dictatorship. Next, Pyongyang has a reputation for terrorism (South Korean cabinet ministers were killed in a 1983 North Korean bombing in Burma) [10] (Oberdorfer, 2001, pp. 142) and kidnapping Japanese nationals from 1977-1983 [11] (Japanese Government Internet TV, 23rd January 2009), implying that she may decide to kill Japanese officials abroad or kidnap Japanese tourists for ransom if Pyongyang calculated that such provocation served her aims. Through Realist lenses, we thus see that North Korea maintains a *Balance of Threat* against Japan.

Islamic terrorism and piracy

Attacks from Muslim terrorists could become increasingly common as Japan boosts her security cooperation with the US. In 2001 the Diet passed legislation sending Japanese naval and air forces to the Indian ocean to support the US led anti-Taliban/Al-Qaeda effort in Afghanistan while in the immediate aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq (which polarised the Muslim world against the US), Japanese military assets were sent to Iraq and the Persian Gulf to aid the US. Also, the US-Japan Defence Policy Review Initiative in 2006 made Japan the command node for directing US power to the Middle East [12] (Hughes and Krauss, 2007, pp. 160-161). Therefore, since Japan might be seen as an accomplice to “Western aggression against Muslims” through support for Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2011) and the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (2001–Present), JSDF personnel, diplomats or even aid workers deployed abroad would be fair game for assassinations, suicide bombings and other violence.

Concerning piracy, this has particular salience for Japan as she is a maritime nation dependent upon the security of her SLOCs for the inflow of raw materials/energy resources and the export of manufactured goods. With this weakness, the hijacking of Japanese commercial vessels to hold their crews and cargoes to ransom is quite damaging to the Japanese economy. More worryingly, pirates might build a preference for capturing Japanese ships because their owners come from the wealthiest nation in Asia and should be cash rich. Essentially, Japanese commercial vitality could well become hostage to sea borne third world criminals.

The Erosion of US Preponderance

Other than the aforementioned threats, another weighty factor which complicates Tokyo’s national security planning is the waning of American dominance. All great empires eventually decline and the US is no exception. While she has been militarily and economically preponderant since 1945, ever since 2001, the US has endured economic adversity and this has arguably constrained her ability to maintain military superiority. The table on the next page helps explain this [table 1](#).

Contemporary US Economic and Military Spending Statistics⁴

This data shows that the US economy faced a slowdown in 2001 and a serious recession with a 2.6% economic contraction in 2009. While recent data implies that the economy is healthy with 1.7% growth in 2011, the unemployment rate suggests otherwise with jobless rates from 2009 to 2011 being 9% and higher which is well above the average rate of 6.7% from 1999 – 2011. Hence, America’s economy continues to exhibit weakness and is not producing enough

goods/services to absorb unemployment. This is bad for government revenue and by association military spending as income tax receipts decline substantially. Next, the US has surging foreign debt exceeding US\$13 trillion since 2009 which reveals that Washington is spending beyond its means and as defence spending is a significant proportion of the federal budget, it follows that US military force projection overseas is at least partially foreign funded. This is unsustainable as foreign debt looks certain to grow and might not be serviceable (interest payments might not be met) if the US enters another recession worse than the one in 2009. As for military expenditure, it grew at rates mostly exceeding US economic expansion from 2008 to 2011 with year-on-year increases of 8% (2008-2009), 2.7% (2009-2010) and 2.6% (2010-2011) which mostly could not be accommodated by economic growth of -2.6%, 2.8% and 1.7% from 2009, 2010 and 2011 respectively. Additionally, defence spending as a proportion of GDP has exceeded 4% since 2008 and it is unclear how long American voters will tolerate this since only unenviable countries like Russia and Jordan maintain similar or higher economic defence burdens at 4.3% and 6.1% of GDP respectively⁵.

Therefore, when American economic malaise and military overstretch is considered and even though a US “strategic pivot towards Asia” has been announced [13] (Goure, 20th October 2011, Lexington Institute), it is difficult to see how the US would be able to devote the required forces to maintain stability in the Middle East, sustain her interests in Latin America, reassure her European allies AND preserve her position as the preeminent “external” hegemon in Asia in the years ahead. Indeed, America’s military expenditure is expected to shrink by at least US\$487 billion over the next 10 years [14] (Chua, 7th April 2012, The Straits Times).

In the end, if economic trends persist with US foreign debt exceeding the US\$ 14 or even 15 trillion mark while unemployment stays above 9% pointing to a lethargic economy, we may well witness a substantial moderation of America’s political and military presence in Asia. On the Japanese front, US troop cutbacks and a possible fading of the US-Japan alliance is a distinct possibility even if Tokyo offers to strengthen her current subsidisation of US basing costs.

The Crane as Representative of Non-Threatening Japanese Security

As the threats to Japan have been elaborated and the possibility of a faltering America in the US-Japan alliance has been analysed, it is proposed that Japan develop expanded military capabilities along with independent politico-military doctrines that both enable Tokyo to be less dependent on the US-Japan alliance while reassuring other Asian states that she is not a threat. Hence, Defensive Realism applies where the JSDF is retooled for an anarchic world while Tokyo tries to convince Japan’s neighbours not to balance against her.

At this point, a review of the abbreviated preamble to the Japanese Constitution as well as the constitution’s pacifist Article 9 is necessary [15] (Hughes, 2004, pp. 32):

⁴All statistics in this table are obtained from the *CIA World Factbook*, sourced from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> on 16th April 2012 except for data on military spending which was obtained from *The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, sourced from <http://milexdata.sipri.org/result.php4> on 16th April 2012.

⁵Data obtained from *The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, sourced from <http://milexdata.sipri.org/result.php4> on 16th April 2012.

Table 1: Contemporary US Economic and Military Spending Statistics⁴.

Year	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
% GDP Growth	4.1	5	0.3	2.45	3.1	4.4	3.2	3.2	2	1.1	-2.6	2.8	1.7
% unemployment	4.2	4	-	5.8	6	5.5	5.1	4.8	4.6	7.2	9.3	9.7	9
Foreign Debt (10s of US\$ Billions)	-	86.2	86.2	86.2	86.2	140	140	883.7	1004	1225	1364	1345	1398
Military Spending in US\$ Billions, 2009 base year.	361.9	375.9	378.9	425.5	484.2	527.8	552.9	561.5	576.3	618.9	668.6	687.1	705.1 (approx)
Military Spending as % of GDP	3	3.1	3.1	3.4	3.8	4	4	3.9	4	4.3	4.7	4.8	-

The Preamble

“We...have determined to preserve our security and existence, trusting in the justice and faith of the peace-loving peoples of the world. We desire to strive for the preservation of peace and the banishment of tyranny....oppression...for all time from the earth.”

Article 9

“The Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right.... and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.”

In order not to offend popular anti-militaristic sentiments amongst the Japanese electorate, any revised Japanese national security strategy would have to rationalise itself as abiding by both the preamble and article 9. However, this is easy as both do not prohibit Japanese self-preservation/self-defence and while peaceful nations can be trusted, Japan is not obliged to tolerate malevolent threats. Referencing Article 9, Japanese belligerency is disavowed but deterrence of aggression against Japan still remains legitimate. In this respect, Japan’s pacifist constitution serves to reassure Asian nations who suffered from Japanese depredations during World War II whilst allowing Tokyo the flexibility to chart an effective national security policy sans the US as an omnipotent sentinel. Indeed, even if a more pro-active defence was warranted because of US regional retrenchment, the need to persuade Asian states that Japan is still benign must be factored into any revamped strategy [16] (Midford, 2002, pp. 21-43).

With the above in mind, publicly adopting the Japanese Crane or *Grus Japonensis* as a representation of Japanese defence strategy could be relevant for independent national security as explained below:

Japan’s non-expansionist nature

The Japanese Crane’s diet only includes commonly available plants and vegetables along with small fish, insects, frogs and miniscule mammals [17] (Johnsgard, 1983, pp. 201). Thus, like the crane, Japan does not devour vast resources or practice expansionism in order to survive and the message would be that Japanese sustenance or progress is not an economic or military threat to anyone. This cuts to the core of Article 9, portraying Japan as harmless.

A flexible JSDF

While its natural habitat are wetlands such as riverbanks, marshes and swamps, the Japanese Crane is equally at home in the air, flying great distances for seasonal migration and even being able to survive on dry ground if necessary [17] (Johnsgard, 1983, pp. 199-201). Similarly, Tokyo could assure the Japanese people that the JSDF is capable of not only conventional military defence (including protecting Japan’s interests in her EEZ) but also able to adroitly manage domestic natural disasters as well as assist with Non-Traditional Security issues like foreign refugee movements into Japan.

As for the JSDF’s foreign roles, the image of Japan being willing

to contribute significantly to regional Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations while being prepared to use the JSDF in non-combat roles for ANY UN sanctioned military action would not only cultivate a non-threatening awareness of its operational readiness but also follows the constitutional preamble by promoting collective security via the non-violent exercise of the JSDF’s advanced capabilities under moral UN auspices.

Benign power projection and subtle deterrence

The Japanese Crane has a very broad 2.2-2.5 meter wingspan [18] (del Hoyo, Elliott and Sargatal, 1996, Vol. 3) and arguably possesses a large and sharp beak. When this symbolism is considered together for national defence policy, Tokyo could subtly communicate to potential adversaries that the JSDF could project its military presence over great distances *if absolutely necessary for Japanese national interests* and has *unobtrusive but effective* deterrence capabilities. Basically, unlike more aggressive national mascots like the eagle (US) and tiger (Malaysia), the crane is not threatening but has characteristics suitable for security preservation. In as far as the power projection and deterrence development components of the “Crane Strategy” are still carried out in a prudent/non-alarming manner, this should still conform to Article 9’s spirit.

Following the above, if a stronger defence posture becomes necessary to implement the “Crane Strategy”, Tokyo should first provide more funds in the form of increasing defence expenditure from 1% to 1.5%. While this is controversial, it should be possible as it merely approximates German defence spending [16] (Midford, 2002, pp. 9) and is rather modest in comparison to US defence spending. Thereafter, the ability of Japanese naval forces to provide enhanced anti-piracy protection for Japanese commercial vessels in international waters and protect the Japanese EEZ could be strengthened with more small warships like frigates or missile patrol boats which have the sophistication of larger naval vessels but are less threatening. Regarding air power, Japan could consider increasing the number of her mid-air refuelling tankers to increase the number of fighter jets that could perform long range defence duties while retiring her sizeable fleet of Vietnam War era fighters and replacing them with a smaller but more effective number of contemporary warplanes. Hence, Japan’s inventory of warplanes would shrink (thus reassuring her neighbours) but her operational power would increase. As for land forces, a move consistent with non-threatening deterrence would be to maintain current troop strength but convert more troops to assume elite special forces duties in order to develop an indigenous capability to conduct overseas hostage rescue or even carry out surgical strikes on military facilities which have launched attacks on Japan. Lastly, Japan’s intelligence Bureau, the Public Security Intelligence Agency should beef up its overseas intelligence gathering efforts so as to better predict adversary actions and even pre-empt terrorism against Japanese citizens.

Conclusion

Like a well-appointed house in a bad neighbourhood, Japan finds itself in an extremely anarchic region facing an expansionist China and hostile North Korea. If US involvement in East Asia were to ever weaken, Japan would have to face a national security self-help situation alone without near term alliance prospects due to Asia's continued distrust of Japan. But all is not lost as Japan's economic wealth enables it to significantly expand its defence capabilities without adversely impairing its civilian economy in order to internally balance against external threats. Such self-help should be done with circumspection, hence giving relevance to the proposed Japanese Crane conceptualisation of Japanese independent national security stressing non-expansionism, flexibility in helping to achieve regional and international collective security and benign power projection along with subtle deterrence. Of course, there are states which will see ANY change in Tokyo's security policies as unwelcome but Japan should do her utmost to adapt to future US retrenchment, effectively cope with the myriad of national security threats encountered in the 21st century and continue to survive and even thrive with her characteristic national resilience and flexibility.

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