Section: Overview

Japan’s military response to a shifting strategic environment

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Japan’s post-Cold War security and defense policy can be divided into distinct phases of reform. In the mid-1990s, these reforms focused on reconfirming or redefining the Japan–US alliance and regionalization of Japan’s defense efforts. In the 2000s, Japan went beyond the region, contributing to the US-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. All along, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) were evolving from a Cold War-style counter-invasion force into a leaner, more effective and qualitatively strengthened military apparatus. Since mid-2010, Japan has moved into the most recent and arguably most comprehensive phase of its security policy reform by reinforcing existing and forging new regional strategic ties and refocusing its military efforts on homeland defense and the maritime East Asian theater. This brief outlines the key elements of the reforms and explains this most recent shift in Japan’s military priorities.¹

China’s rise and the East Asian power balance

Japan’s defense reforms are taking place against the backdrop of a notable power shift in East Asia. Over the course of just a few decades, China has considerably closed the gap with the US on key indicators of state power. China’s emergence as a great power in East Asia has tremendous implications for Japan, not least in security terms. Considering its massive population, large territory, vast natural resource endowment and large and growing economy, China is in a unique position to challenge the United States’ military preponderance in East Asia, the very cornerstone of Japan’s national security.

China has displayed impressive economic growth over the course of a few decades. Its double-digit average annual economic growth has had a tangible impact on regional and global economic power distribution. Using gross domestic product (GDP) measured at market exchange rates as an indicator, Japan’s and the US’ economies were more than seven and fourteen times the size of China’s respectively in 1990. By 2012, China’s economy had surpassed Japan’s (in 2010) as the second largest economy in the world, measuring more than half the size of the United States’. What’s more, most projections suggest that China’s economy will overtake the United States’ as the largest economy in the world in nominal figures within two or three decades.

China’s rapidly increasing wealth presents Japan not only with great economic opportunities but also severe security challenges, most notably associated with the equally impressive hikes in defense spending this economic growth has supported. According to estimates provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China increased its defense spending seven times over, with an average yearly increase of 12%, in the 1994-2012 timeframe. China’s defense budget measured less than half of Japan’s in the mid-1990s. Today the tables are turned as China’s defense budget measures two and a half times the size of Japan’s. As a share of the United States’ defense budget, Chinese defense spending rose from 5% in 1994 to 25% in 2012. If current trends persist, China is on course to catch up with the United States in terms of military expenditure within three or four
decades, although its defense spending as a percentage of GDP (roughly 2%) measures only half of the United States’ (roughly 4%).

A substantial amount of this increasingly voluminous defense spending has been invested in developing naval capabilities that comprise the military dimension of China’s notable maritime transformation.\(^2\) Rest assured; the United States remains by far the mightiest military power in maritime East Asia, but China is investing substantially in military capabilities with significant potential in terms of undermining the American regional naval supremacy upon which Japan as an inherent East Asian maritime nation ultimately relies for security.

China’s aircraft carrier and fifth-generation fighter aircraft programs often attract (too) much attention. Far more significant in military power balance terms is China’s emerging anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, featuring attack submarines, anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), and long-range land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs). To the extent that these capabilities are successfully developed and deployed they can transform the military and, in particular, naval balance in the region by severely restricting the regional presence and operations of rival military powers, including Japanese and US forces. Against the perceptions of a US in relative decline, this military element of China’s maritime transformation has not only raised Japanese threat perceptions about China’s rise but also instilled concerns about US abandonment, setting in motion military measures to counter and alleviate both concerns.

**Japan’s military response**

Japan’s apprehensions about China’s rise and the shifting East Asian power distribution are not new. Neither is its military response. In 1994, Prime Minister Hosokawa established a special advisory commission to analyze and provide corresponding security and defense policy recommendations for Japan’s post-Cold War strategic environment. The report of the commission noted that “many nations in Asia, including China, now have the political motives and economic foundations for improving their military power.”\(^3\) In an initial hedge against what at the time was characterized as “unpredictability and uncertainty” in Japan’s strategic environment, Japan acted upon the report’s recommendations in deciding to maintain its alliance with the US although the Soviet Union, the threat against which it was formed, had seized to exist.

**Maritime rivalry**

Since then, a regional maritime rivalry between China and Japan has become prominent. One reflection of this is heightened tensions in the East China Sea over overlapping sovereignty claims to a group of islands known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. Another is Japan’s most recent military reform process, initiated under the previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government, now in the opposition, and strengthened under incumbent Prime Minister Abe. This reform clearly reflects Japan’s growing apprehensions about and response to the aforementioned security challenges associated with China’s rise and emergence as a regional maritime great power.

Japan’s most recent defense posture reform was initiated by a 2010 revision of the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), the capstone document of Japan’s defense policy. The
document reflected several significant changes in Japan’s defense posture that have by and large been maintained under the succeeding defense guidelines. On the doctrinal level, Dynamic Defense Forces replaced Basic Defense Forces as Japan’s official defense concept, moving away from its traditionally passive approach to deterrence relying on the mere existence of the armed forces. Rather, the new concept emphasizes developing armed forces characterized by “readiness, mobility, flexibility, sustainability, and versatility” and deterrence based on displaying these military capabilities in action. In its own words, “clear demonstration of national will and strong defense capabilities [...], not just maintaining a certain level of defense force, is a critical element for ensuring credible deterrence.”

Dynamic deterrent

The 2010 NDPG and the Dynamic Defense Force concept also formally broke with the traditional force posture characterized by heavy counter-invasion forces stationed in the northern parts of Japan, seeking rather to shift Japan’s military weight toward the Southwestern maritime region in an unprecedented reflection of Japan’s growing apprehensions about China’s emerging maritime ambitions and presence in Japan’s neighboring seas, in particular the East China Sea.

In pursuit of such a dynamic deterrent in its Southwestern region, Japan increased its defense spending by 0.8% in FY2013, the first budget hike in eleven years, and set aside a supplementary budget of ¥180.5 billion (approximately USD 1.83 billion) earmarked for strengthening Japan’s defense posture in the East China Sea. In fiscal year 2014, Japan’s defense budget saw a more substantial increase of 2.8%.

In terms of force structure reform, three developments stand out as particularly noteworthy in Japan’s pursuit of such dynamic defense forces in the Southwestern region. The first major element of Japan’s force posture reform is its efforts to boost the Maritime Self-Defense Force’s (MSDF) anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities. Under the NDPG, the submarine fleet is set to expand from sixteen to twenty-two vessels, and upgraded P-1 long-range jet ASW patrol aircraft are replacing the older P-3C propeller aircraft. Japan is also introducing an upgraded version of its 13,950-ton flat-top Hyuga-class destroyer and the 19,500-ton Izumo-class capable of carrying up to fourteen SH-60 patrol helicopters.

The second major element involves Japan’s efforts to strengthen JSDF’s ability to defend remote islands. Most notably, Japan is setting up a dedicated amphibious assault unit, in effect a small Marine Corps style force, within the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF). To support such amphibious operations, Japan is introducing the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft operable from Japan’s flat-top destroyers for airlifting personnel into amphibious contingencies in remote island locations as well as amphibious landing and assault vehicles. To strengthen Japan’s defense posture in the East China Sea the ASDF (Japan’s airforce) is also upgrading and moving additional F-15 fighters to Okinawa and acquiring forty-two F-35A fighter aircraft.

The third major element of Japan’s force structure reform under the NDPG is its emphasis on strengthening intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. One example of this effort is the upgrading and establishment of new radar facilities in the Southwestern region, including on the westernmost island of Yonaguni. The maintenance infrastructure for
E-2C early warning aircraft operating in the East China Sea out of the Naha Air Base in Okinawa has also been improved. As part of its effort to strengthen ISR capabilities, Japan is acquiring Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) from the United States.

**Japan-US alliance**

Japan’s pursuit of dynamic deterrence extends also to its alliance with the United States. Japan has sought to develop and strengthen *dynamic defense cooperation* in terms of intelligence gathering and sharing, contingency planning, operational cooperation, joint exercises and training, and shared use of facilities. Notable examples of these efforts include air and missile defense headquarters co-located at the Yokota Air Base, featuring real-time information-sharing on airborne threats and large-scale joint military exercises promoting interoperability between Japanese and US air, naval, missile defense and amphibious forces.

Japan and the US are in the process of upgrading the formal alliance defense guidelines, emphasizing an expanded role for Japanese forces and greater bilateral interoperability. In preparation for the new guidelines, the Government of Japan led by Prime Minister Abe has reinterpreted Japan’s formal interpretation of the war-renouncing Constitution to allow the Self-Defense Forces to engage in acts of collective self-defense, paving the way for closer operational cooperation with US forces. Japan is also actively supporting the US strengthening its military presence in Okinawa, most notably with F-35B fighter aircraft and additional missile defense and amphibious assets.

**A maritime rivalry in the making**

While Japan can and indeed has reaped great economic benefits from the rise of China, the latter’s emergence as a maritime great power and the concomitant power shift in East Asia is an inherent security challenge for Japan. Aspiring to maintain a favorable regional military power balance, or at the very least to prevent the balance from rapidly shifting further in its disfavor, Japan is refocusing its military efforts on maritime East Asia. In particular, Japan’s military reform emphasizes defense of and deterrence in the region most exposed to the challenges associated with China taking to the sea, namely the Southwestern islands and their surrounding seas and airspace. Japan’s military response to China’s maritime transformation reflects a regional maritime rivalry in the making.

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2. For more on China’s maritime transformation, see Jo Inge Bekkevold on “China’s rise and international politics” in this issue of *Atlantisch Perspectief*.