

# Japan's Military Rebirth

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# Japan's Military Rebirth

Against the background of a deteriorating security situation in the East China Sea, Japan's conservative government is steadily dissociating itself from a decades-old tradition of military self-restraint. The island nation faces a difficult balancing act between reinforcement of its defense potential and continuation of its reticence in security policy matters.

By Michael Haas

When Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe entered the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo on 26 December 2013, the gesture once again violated regional sensibilities, but it had long ceased to be a taboo move. Visits to the shrine, which honors not only ordinary Japanese war dead, but also a number of war criminals, have become an established ritual for conservative-nationalist politicians as part of an agenda of security-policy "normalization". Since his return to power as prime minister in late 2012, Abe has been pursuing this goal with determination. As the candidate of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), he had run on a platform of restoring Japan to economic and military might in the context of the escalating territorial conflict with the People's Republic of China.

Eighteen months later, the efforts of the Abe administration are bearing fruit: After a decade of diminishing funds, the defense budget was considerably increased, the capabilities of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) were expanded in important areas, and most recently, the decades-old ban on arms exports was lifted. Even the most controversial aspect of the conservative defense program – the easing of constitutional constraints on the use of military force – was



Japan is currently adapting its defense strategy. Even today, the country is a maritime power of some stature. *Kim Kyung-Hoon / Reuters*

tackled with vigor. At the same time, the alliance with the US is closer than at any other time since the end of the Cold War.

This new phase in the right wing's much-touted dissociation from the post-war tradition of comprehensive military self-restraint is mainly a result of regional dynamics. However, the political leadership's

change of course not only calls into question the "Peace Constitution" imposed by the US in 1947; it also invokes the ghosts of Japan's troubled past as a military power. In the regional context, these developments are regarded with great suspicion not only by China, but also by US allies such as South Korea. In the absence of suitable mechanisms for conflict resolution, these

historical animosities weigh all the more heavily. In the following, the background of the current developments will be highlighted and important aspect of the adaptation in security policy will be analyzed.

### The Burden of History

Japan's defense policy is encumbered in several ways by the country's history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. First of all, in the regional perception, the notion of Japan as a military power is inseparably linked to its policies of brutal colonialism and conquest. Moreover, as a result of its military defeat in the Second World War, Japan was limited by its constitution to a role of military restraint and of dependence on the US in matters of security policy.

Japan's ascent to become the predominant power in Asia resulted directly in the colonization of Taiwan and Korea. In the 1930s, this was followed by the occupation of Manchuria and large parts of China's heartland. From 1941 onwards, those efforts to create a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere" culminated in the ab-

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sorption of the West's colonies in Southeast Asia. According to some estimates, until 1945, Japan's expansionism, which partially tipped over into a policy of extermination, cost up to 10 million lives in mainland China alone. Millions more were hauled off into forced labor, hundreds of thousands of East Asian women were subjected to sexual exploitation by Japanese forces. While post-war Japanese governments have repeatedly apologized to the victims, they have never accepted comprehensive responsibility for this dark chapter in the way that the Federal Republic of Germany, for instance, has done.

### Pacifist About-Face

Both in constitutional and in practical terms, the foreign and defense policies of the democratic Japanese state constitute radical departures from the warlike tradition of the imperial era. Under Article 9 of the constitution dictated by the US occupation forces, the Japanese people renounces, in perpetuity, war as a sovereign national right and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. In order to ensure this goal by practical means,

Japan is legally prohibited from maintaining "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential". While this ban, in the context of the emerging Cold War, was soon undermined with the consent of the occupation force, far-reaching limitations remained in place. Thus, the use of Japanese troops overseas even in the context of UN missions was banned completely until the 1990s. Moreover, to this day, Japan forsakes the right to collective self-defense as enshrined in the UN Charter. The JSDF are only allowed to use force in defense against direct attacks on its troops or Japanese property.

Also highly regulated is the possession of offensive military capabilities, which is why the island nation may possess neither aircraft carriers nor long-range attack capabilities. The development, production, and possession of nuclear arms are strictly opposed in the political mainstream. The defense budget ceiling is fixed at one per cent of GNP. Due to these constraints, which unlike the constitutional measures are self-imposed, Japan remains dependent on US

military guarantees to this day. Nevertheless, the restrictive interpretations of the constitutional norms – even, and especially, given the way they are questioned by the Abe administration – are strongly supported in the Japanese population. Ja-

pan's security situation has changed considerably in the past two decades, however. On the one hand, the resource-poor island nation with its export-oriented economy has not been sheltered from global fault lines and instabilities. On the other, the defense requirements of the home islands have also changed quite considerably.

### An End to Isolation

Already at the beginning of the 1990s, Japan's relative isolation from global security developments was called into question. For instance, the LDP government in Tokyo was criticized for its limited contribution to the 1991 Gulf War. Soon thereafter, the first contribution of a small number of UN peacekeeping forces was grudgingly approved.

However, the first major breach in deployment policy only arrived in the context of the US-led "War on Terror". From 2002 onwards, the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) maintained a resupply group in the Indian Ocean as part of Operation *Enduring Freedom*. For reasons of political solidarity and due to the country's massive



dependence on Middle East oil, Tokyo assisted the US in Iraq with support troops from 2004 onwards. In 2009, Japanese warships and maritime reconnaissance units were deployed for the first time to participate in the multinational anti-piracy measures off the Horn of Africa. The naval units were also authorized to use force, as a last resort, to protect ships under other countries' flags. However, in the case of the petroleum engineers taken hostage in Algeria in early 2013, the JSDF proved similarly incapable of making a useful contribution to protect Japanese citizens overseas as in the case of the traumatic 1996 hostage-taking in the Japanese embassy in Peru.

### New Threat Situation

With respect to territorial defense, the only immediate threat to Japanese population centers was for a long time the limited missile capability of an unpredictable North Korea. This situation has become more urgent due to the nuclear armament of the regime, which is hostile to Japan. At the same time, the overall focus of the defense strategy has shifted from securing the main northern and central islands of Hokkaidō and Honshū towards defense against a potential invasion on the periphery of the Japanese archipelago, which consists of nearly 7'000 small or minuscule islands. Japan is involved in territorial disputes with four of its five neighbor states. While the disputes with Russia over the southern Kuril Islands and with South Korea over

Takeshima/Dokdo are essentially stable, the conflict with the People's Republic of China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has escalated rather dramatically since 2010. This dispute must be understood against the background of China's increasing military power and more offensive foreign policy. Ultimately, the point of reference of the claims pursued by both sides with increasing vehemence is not the status of this small group of islands, but rather the regional status quo and the struggle over the shape of a future security order.

At this stage, both states are for the most part limiting themselves to the use of paramilitary and civilian agencies. The risks of uncontrolled escalation currently appears to be quite low, as the mode of confrontation is primarily geared towards symbolic assertions of clearly delineated claims. However, an incident in January 2013, when a Chinese warship allegedly locked onto a Japanese destroyer with its fire control radar, illustrates that the potential for military confrontations cannot be discounted. The density of military interaction is particularly high in the air, where the Japanese air defense zone overlaps with a

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Chinese zone newly established in November 2013. In the past fiscal year, Japanese fighters were scrambled on a total of 812 occasions, in more than half of these cases against Chinese aircraft. This number is the highest since 1989.

### Adapted Defense Strategy

The resurgence of China, which has increased its military budget by about 400 per cent since 2000, and the possibility of a military conflict over remote island territories require an adaptation of the capability profile and the modus operandi of the JSDF. In order to be able to enforce its claims credibly and to be prepared for a possible aggravation of the conflict, Japan like other states in the region, is moving to modernize and in some areas expand its military forces. According to Prime Minister Abe, the JSDF must be configured for "proactive pacifism". However, despite its constitutional restraints, Japan already today maintains highly modern, professional,

and capital-intensive armed forces that compares favorably to other regional armed forces. Thus, while the Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) is numerically far inferior to the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force, the balance is by no means hopeless when it comes to modern fourth-generation multi-role fighter aircraft, where despite China's rapid modernization, the ratio of forces is 1:2.15. The MSDF has a 2.25:1 superiority over the Chinese navy in terms of destroyers, and has a qualitatively superior submarine fleet.

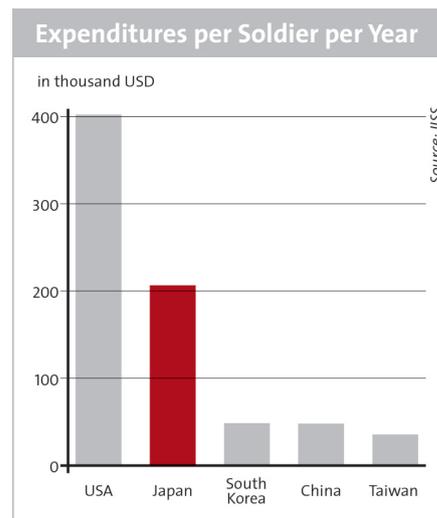
In order to be able to ensure security in the long term as well, Japan has in recent years decided to restructure its ground forces to make them more easily deployable and geographically balanced. Moreover, the Defense White Paper of 2013 outlined the creation of an amphibious fighting force of up to 3'000 troops that will initially comprise one light infantry regiment. Also, the southwestern Ryūkyū island chain is to be monitored much more effectively.

Based on a budget increase of five per cent, a series of important procurements has been initiated. The air force will be expanded by 28 F-35 multi-role fighters, which will give it a diversified air-to-ground capability. Additionally, four early-warning aircraft, three tankers, and three RQ-4 Global Hawk surveillance drones will be purchased. These capabilities must be seen in the context of the debate over possible pre-emptive strikes against North Korea's intermediate- and long-range missiles.

In the coming years, the MSDF will be commissioning two Izumo-class "helicopter destroyers", a ship type that might also be classified as a light aircraft carrier. Since these are potentially offensive capabilities and the question of maritime force projection remains a politically sensitive one, the government is pursuing a policy of obfuscation. The submarine flotilla is to be increased from 16 to 22 boats, and the navy will also receive seven more guided-missile destroyers and 23 new maritime patrol aircraft. Additionally, there are plans for a littoral combat vessel, most likely to be developed in cooperation with the US.

### Deepening Alliance

In recent years, the negative regional security dynamics have led to a revitalization of the alliance with the US both on the political and on the military level. While as



recently as in the 2000s, tensions over the US troop presence on Okinawa and over the future course of US grand strategy had given rise to mutual doubts, the allies have closed ranks once more in the last few years. While question marks remain regarding the US "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific space, there is little doubt as to Washington's intention of continuing its far-reaching engagement in the region. In this context, Japan is an indispensable and indeed irreplaceable partner.

This solid basis constitutes the foundation for a further deepening of the alliance. In the conflict with China over the disputed islands, Washington has vowed if necessary to invoke the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security of 1960, Article V of which stipulates mutual assistance in conflict situations. Conversely, the moves by the Abe administration to facilitate collective defense actions are meeting with approval in the US. Armaments cooperation has been further consolidated, with Japan enjoying special status particularly in the area of sea-based missile defense. Future developments might lead specifically to a broadening of Japan's tasks in case of a conflict. During the Cold War, the JSDF was committed to certain defensive support tasks; especially in submarine hunting and minesweeping, it has developed impressive capabilities. In the case of a future conflict in the East China Sea or on the Korean peninsula, Japan could bring to bear a considerably greater spectrum of military means.

This would also require a stronger integration into US operational planning and net-

## Japan and Switzerland

In 2014, Switzerland and Japan are celebrating the 150th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. Ties between the two high-tech countries are particularly intensive in the economic sphere. In 2009, a **free-trade agreement between Japan and Switzerland** entered into force. To this day, it remains the only such treaty between Japan and a European country. Switzerland's exports in 2012 stood at about CHF7 billion, against imports from Japan valued at about CHF4.2 billion. After the US and China, Japan is the third-largest trading partner of Switzerland outside of Europe.

In terms of diplomacy, Japan is **one of Switzerland's closest Asian partners**, with cooperation being especially close in the World Trade Association and climate protection. In 2007, a bilateral agreement on scientific and technological cooperation was concluded; two years ago, the decision was made to intensify this cooperation further. Cultural exchange is also significant: Every year, Switzerland welcomes 300'000 visitors from Japan.

After the **nuclear accident at Fukushima** in March 2011, Switzerland sent emergency responders to assist in the recovery efforts. The disaster has also had an effect on Switzerland's energy policy. Switzerland's nuclear power plants will not be replaced after the end of their safe operational lifetime. Currently, it is anticipated that the last reactor will be decommissioned by 2034.

for all practical purposes, be out of the question. Against this backdrop, retaining the "hub and spoke" system of bilateral alliances, with the US playing a strong balancing role, is by no means a worst-case scenario.

Among the Japanese electorate, too, the reforms instigated by the Abe administration are controversial. Indeed, it appears that the massive push to change the constitution has already given rise to considerable resistance in the population. While a small majority regarded such a revision as necessary when the administration came into power, a majority of eligible voters today rejects an erosion of the strictly pacifist reading of the constitution. Whether Japan will succeed in its tightrope walk between newfound military power and continued political restraint remains to be seen, not least because it is a matter of political sensitivity and the judicious handling of the highly charged symbolism of Japanese

works, which is not currently the case. While the *Air-Sea Battle* concept, which aims to ensure US operational superiority against an adversary with highly developed anti-access capabilities – in concrete terms, China – stipulates close cooperation with regional allies, it risks establishing additional obstacles when it comes to interoperability. At the same time, Tokyo will hardly be prepared to have its prerogative of sovereign deployment of Japanese troops curtailed by far-reaching entanglement with US operational plans.

Concerns about being dragged into a conflict by an ally against the national interest are not completely absent in Washington, either. Considering Abe's nationalism and the occasionally openly confrontational stance of Japan in the dispute over the Senkaku Islands, such a scenario has become more credible in recent years. Therefore, a more assertive and proactive Japan would not necessarily become the reliable partner that its allies across the Pacific wish for.

### Regional Concerns

For many East and Southeast Asian states, the scenario of a Japan unfettered from its self-imposed restraint remains imbued

with deep-rooted fears that in turn may negatively influence the increasingly confrontational dynamic in the region. At the same time, in view of China's military ascent, it no longer seems realistic for the second-largest regional power to hang on to a largely isolationist defense policy. In the long run, this would result in a massive imbalance that not even the US would be able to equalize single-handedly. Finding an acceptable middle ground here would require the sort of political tactfulness that the Japanese political establishment has often lacked in the past.

The proponents of the conservative-nationalist agenda believe that the "normalization" in security policy matters should be based on a positive reinterpretation of Japanese history, rather than a serious reappraisal. Japan's military rebirth could therefore negatively affect the underdeveloped regional conflict resolution mechanisms and further entrench the existing fault lines even between US allies. Any attempt at merging the various alliances into a more cooperative security structure would then,

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power. Overcoming internal shortcomings in Japan's politics of memory will thus also become a test of the Western-oriented order in East Asia.

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