



Japan's strategic re-awakening

Ted Galen Carpenter – February 6, 2013

A key development in East Asia has been Japan's surprising assertiveness regarding its territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands in the East China Sea. But that is merely the latest sign that Tokyo is beginning to act as a normal great power. That trend has been building for more than a decade, and the manifestations have ranged from adopting a hardline stance toward North Korea's nuclear and missile programs to a more insistent quest for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. After a long slumber as a quasi-pacifist nation, Japan appears to be experiencing a strategic re-awakening. Only time will tell how far that re-awakening progresses, but it already has important implications for its neighbors in East Asia, especially China, and for the United States.

US policymakers have long been ambivalent about Japan's strategic role in East Asia. Washington's initial enthusiasm after World War II for disarming Japan and pushing for a pacifist orientation, symbolized by the adoption of article nine in the country's new constitution, gradually gave way to a more pragmatic stance as the Cold War with the Soviet Union deepened and the US needed military allies. American officials quietly backed a reinterpretation of article nine to allow Japan to build "self defense forces" and to conclude a mutual defense treaty with the United States.

As the years went on, Washington prodded Tokyo to contribute more to the collective defense effort - even to some extent to provide financial support for US military initiatives outside East Asia, most notably in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. But the quest for greater burden sharing was always in the context of Japan playing the role of an obedient junior security partner.

Most members of the US political and foreign policy elite were deeply suspicious of any signs that Tokyo might want to adopt an independent military role. Lt. General Henry Stackpole, the commander of Marine forces stationed on Okinawa in the early 1990s, infamously described the US role in East Asia as being "the cap in the bottle" preventing a revival of Japanese militarism and the regional instability that would ensue. The Pentagon's 1995 planning guidance document for East Asia contained language that expressed the fear that "another country" - possibly China, but more likely Japan - might seek to displace the United States as the region's leading security actor.

US uneasiness about a more robust Japanese military role eased slightly during the administration of George W. Bush, as Washington sought to broaden its bilateral alliances with both Japan and South Korea to deal with contingencies throughout East

Asia, not merely threats directed against those two countries. But even during the Bush years, there was concern that Tokyo might pursue a more independent policy instead of merely helping to implement Washington's agenda.

Japan was, in fact, beginning to place greater emphasis on its own priorities and showed a decreased willingness to rely so heavily on the United States for its security. A key event was North Korea's surprise test of a missile in 1998 - a missile that flew over Japanese territory. Japanese leaders were disturbed about Washington's rather low-key response to Pyongyang's provocation. Among other actions, Tokyo decided to deploy its own network of intelligence satellites to reduce Japan's dependence on US intelligence data. That network has steadily expanded, most recently with the launch of two new, more sophisticated, satellites in January 2013.

Japanese governments have become much more assertive on the diplomatic front regarding national security issues. That was especially true during Shinzo Abe's first stint as prime minister in 2006-2007, when Tokyo took a harder-line stance than the United States in the Six-Party Talks designed to get North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions. The Japanese government also repeatedly prodded Washington to push for more stringent UN sanctions against Pyongyang.

All of those moves reflected a growing belief in Japan that although Japanese and US security interests certainly overlapped, they were not identical. As Washington's security priorities focused more on the Middle East and Central Asia after 9/11, and the US government's budgetary woes grew worse, creating the specter of smaller naval and air forces, support in Japan for a more independent security role has grown. The traditional pacifist strain in public and elite opinion remains strong, but the trend is in the opposite direction, and Abe's return as prime minister is likely to accelerate that trend. There are even indications that Japan may finally breach the self-imposed limit of spending no more than 1% of the country's gross domestic product on defense. The Obama administration's "strategic pivot" to East Asia was designed in part to reassure Japan that the United States was not abandoning its allies, and that Washington fully intended to contain China's growing power, but the pivot is unlikely to dissuade Tokyo from its current course.

Manifestations of Japan's assertiveness have important consequences for the United States. Tokyo is pressing Washington for greater backing regarding the islands dispute with China, repeatedly insisting that the mutual defense treaty covers those islands. The Obama administration has accepted that interpretation, while insisting that the United States remains neutral regarding the substance of the competing claims - an utterly incoherent position.

The irony is that Washington has gradually sought greater burden sharing from Japan, meaning greater Japanese support for US security goals. But now the United States may well find itself under pressure to provide greater support for Japanese security objectives. US leaders are likely to discover that such reverse burden sharing creates some awkward and potentially dangerous obligations. In particular, having to back Japan in the

Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute would certainly chill Sino-US relations, and it could even lead to an outright crisis if fighting erupted between Japan and China.

Washington needs to reassess the scope and implications of its alliance with Japan. A more robust Japanese security role creates the prospect of a regional player that, in combination with other democratic countries, could balance China and remove the fear of possible Chinese hegemony in East Asia. That, in turn, increases the opportunity for the United States to off-load some of its military burdens in the region. But those gains come at price. No longer will Washington be able to make all the policy decisions and count on Japan to obediently support them. Tokyo has its own agenda, and is now vigorously pursuing it. A new era appears to be emerging - for Japan, for East Asia, and for the United States. The question needs to be asked whether the military alliance, at least in its current form, with Japan now entails more risks than benefits for the United States.