



Tokyo's New Military Guidelines Based On Old Principle: U.S. Does Defending, Japan Gets Defended

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May 1, 2015

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Washington in style, with a state dinner and speech to Congress. He brought with him plans for a more expansive international role for his country, but the military burden of defending Japan will continue to fall disproportionately on America.

World War II still hangs over Japan and its relations with neighboring states. As occupying power, the U.S. imposed the “peace constitution” on Tokyo, with Article Nine banning possession of a military. As the Cold War developed, however, Washington recognized that a rearmed Japan could play an important security role.

Japanese officials equaled American politicians in creatively interpreting their nation’s fundamental law—Tokyo established “Self-Defense Forces” as opposed to armed forces. However, Japan’s governments hid between the amendment to cap military outlays and limit the SDF’s role, ensuring American protection.

That approach also suited Tokyo’s neighbors, including other U.S. allies, most of which had suffered under Imperial Japan’s brutal occupation. Although not everyone was hostile to Tokyo, Australia, the Philippines, and South Korea especially preferred Japan disarmed and Washington as military guardian. Marine Corps Gen. Henry Stackpole famously referred to U.S. troops in Japan as a “cap in the bottle” to remilitarization.

As America’s economic edge ebbed and the international security challenges grew, Washington urged Tokyo to do more, though under U.S. direction. Movement was glacial, however. Although some members of the ruling LDP, such as Abe, who previously served as prime minister, shared a more nationalist perspective, policy change was limited by the pacifist-minded

population. In recent years, however, Japanese sentiment has shifted toward a more vigorous military role in the face of an unpredictable North Korea developing both missiles and nuclear weapons and a powerful China growing more confrontational.

This changing environment generated the new “Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation,” formally released on Tuesday. Yet the much-heralded document—the first revision in 18 years—might deliver less than promised. The guidelines are only aspirational and state that they create no obligations for either government.

More important, the presentation is about Japanese, not American security. In essence, the new standards affirm what should have been obvious all along—Japan will help America defend Japan. For instance, the guidelines discuss responding to “emerging threats to Japan’s peace and security” and “an armed attack against Japan.” Washington commits to “continue to forward deploy combat-ready forces in the Asia-Pacific region and maintain the ability to reinforce those forces rapidly.” In contrast, there is nothing about Tokyo supporting U.S. defense or security. American interests simply are subsumed in a short section at the end about “cooperation for regional and global peace and security.”

This approach was evident in the Prime Minister Abe’s speech to Congress, when he spoke of maintaining “the peace and security of the Asia-Pacific region.” He emphasized “the central pillar that is the U.S.-Japan alliance.” Tokyo’s responsibility, he said, is to “fortify the U.S.-Japan alliance.” He explained that his government is seeking “to enhance the legislative foundations of our security” in order to “make the cooperation between the U.S. military and Japan’s Self-Defense Forces even stronger, and the alliance still more solid.” He lauded the new provisions under which Japan would “take yet more responsibility for the peace and stability in the world,” but as examples mostly cited humanitarian and peace-keeping operations.

Even these modest changes won’t come easily. Abe enjoys a large legislative majority, but his coalition partner, necessary to reach two-thirds, opposes amending Article Nine. The public also is skeptical: last year demonstrations erupted against Abe’s defense proposals and one protestor set himself on fire, forcing the government to adjust its plans. A recent Pew Research poll found that only 29 percent of Japanese supported new legislation to implement the guidelines. Just 23 percent wanted their government to be more active militarily.

Nor is there any guarantee that Tokyo will aggressively implement the new standards if passed. A Foreign Ministry spokesman treated as a great advance the fact that the new rules would allow a Japanese ship on patrol with an American vessel to render aid if the latter was attacked—something which most Americans would see as inherent to any genuine “alliance.” However, Tokyo professor Narushige Michishita argued that “technically” the new rules would not allow Japan to defend a U.S. ship if Japan’s security was not directly threatened. Moreover, Tokyo almost certainly would do its best to avoid situations where combat might be involved. Opined Japanese scholar Jun Okumura, “We will wait a long time before a destroyer is conveniently nearby when the Chinese [navy] attacks the U.S. 7th Fleet.”

Worse, Japan’s military outlays were essentially flat over the last decade while Washington, and more ominously for Japan, the People’s Republic of China, dramatically increased military

expenditures. Tokyo's annual spending of some \$50 billion annually is about one-third to one-fourth as much as the PRC (estimates of China's real spending vary). Focusing SDF resources on non-military duties, as suggested by Abe in his speech, actually would inflate the PRC's military edge, with the U.S. left to fill the widening gap.

Obviously Abe expects the two nations' basic roles to remain the same. Tokyo's job is non-combat. Abe touted his nation's "proactive contribution to peace based on the principle of international cooperation." That is, Japan will do some relatively costless and riskless social work which will enhance Tokyo's international reputation. For instance, Japan is prepared to help deal with "terrorism, infectious diseases, natural disasters and climate change." Even Tokyo's potential new "security" duties appear designed to avoid combat—cyber warfare, reconnaissance, mine-sweeping, logistics. None of these require a military alliance.

Washington's job is to do anything bloody or messy. That is, deter and fight wars with other militaries, a task which the prime minister ignored. Some observers talk about the guidelines creating a more equal relationship based on mutual defense, but that isn't what the new rules say. The U.S. has been responsible for defending Japan. The U.S. continues to be responsible for defending Japan. Indeed, it must do more to defend Japan. Explained President Barack Obama: "I want to reiterate that our treaty commitment to Japan's security is absolute, and that Article 5 covers all territories under Japan's administration, including Senkakus Islands." The Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee reported that both nations' ministers "confirmed the strategic importance of deploying the most modern and advanced U.S. capabilities to Japan"; "welcomed the deployment" of various American aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, and ships; and "stressed the importance of sustained cooperation in enhancing Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) capabilities" through deployment of additional U.S. weapons. (Many of these likely will go to Okinawa, which already bears a disproportionate burden of America's "forward presence.")

Since the PRC is a nuclear power, in practice the U.S. must continue to risk Los Angeles to protect Tokyo. Of course, no one imagines a conflict, let alone one that would go nuclear. However, wars often are not expected and rarely turn out as predicted. Beijing has far more at stake in any East Asian conflict and would be willing to risk much more than would Washington. Confronting China over Japan would not be the same as disposing of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, or Serbia.

While America has an obvious interest in Japan's continued independence, no one imagines a Chinese attempt to conquer Tokyo. Rather, the most likely trigger for conflict today is the Senkaku Islands, a half dozen valueless pieces of rock which have taken on increased importance because of the potential resources around them. Beijing's claim to what the Chinese call the Diaoyus is as good if not better than that of Japan. That doesn't justify the PRC using force, but Abe so far has preferred confrontational to compromise—a stance reinforced by Washington's explicit guarantee.

One provision of the new guidelines directly though anonymously deals with the Senkakus: "If the need arises, the Self-Defense Forces will conduct operations to retake an island." In such an effort the SDF would expect to work with U.S. units, especially those currently stationed in

Japan. Moreover, the two governments are discussing mounting joint patrols elsewhere in the South China Sea, which also would draw the U.S. into any Japanese confrontation with China, including over claims of other nations which might be cooperating with Tokyo, such as the Philippines and Vietnam.

Abe's historical revisionism further inflames regional tensions. It is difficult to assess what proportions are belief, tradition, and politics. Abe and other senior officials backed away from prior acceptance of Tokyo's responsibility for starting the Pacific war and coercing women into military brothels. High profile visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, which memorializes several Class A convicted war criminals, inflame passions. Revised textbooks downplayed Japan's World War II role and emphasized Japan's current territorial claims.

None of this suggests that Tokyo is about to embark upon a new round of imperial conquests. But such incidents create suspicion and antagonize other nations, including South Korea, which should work closely with Japan to promote regional peace and stability. Abe addressed the historical controversy in his speech to Congress when he spoke of his "deep repentance in my heart" for American lives lost fighting in the Pacific in World War II and reaffirmed the apologies of prior Japanese premiers for their nation's conduct. However, he should use the same tone in addressing his neighbors and his government should avoid new incidents.

There actually was much to celebrate in Prime Minister Abe's visit. But a largely one-way military alliance is not one of them. Abe intended to highlight the changing bilateral alliance. Unfortunately, Washington and Tokyo only have reinforced the status quo. President Obama admitted: "it's important to recognize we do not expect some instant and major transformation in terms of how Japan projects military power." Worse, he obviously doesn't expect Tokyo to take over more responsibility for defending its own interests. Alas, American policy almost guarantees that Japan will never devote lives and resources to its own defense commensurate with its interest in its own defense.

Indeed, U.S. officials appear to have forgotten the purpose of alliances—to help the country making the alliance. Abe was eloquent in stating why Japan enjoyed being allied with America. It isn't evident what the U.S. receives in return. The problem is not just the administration. Representatives J. Randy Forbes and K. Michael Conaway, members of the Armed Services Committee, pushed an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act "reiterating the United States' commitment to Japan." Why? No doubt, Washington defending Japan is good for Tokyo. But how does doing so benefit Americans who do the paying today and may do the dying tomorrow?

After World War II the U.S. sensibly shielded allied states from totalitarian assault as they recovered. That policy succeeded decades ago. Now Washington should cede responsibility for defending its populous and prosperous friends and allies. These nations still should cooperate, including on the "human security" issues emphasized by Abe. Moreover, America should remain a watchful and wary friend, prepared to act from afar against potentially hostile hegemonic threats. Beijing might eventually become one, but it is not close to being one today. In the meantime Washington should let other states manage day-to-day disputes and controversies in the region.

The U.S. should not tell Tokyo what to do. Japan's defense and foreign policies belong to the Japanese. Nor should American officials attempt to micro-manage Tokyo's responses to Chinese challenges in the Senkakus or elsewhere. Rather, Washington should explain what it will not do. No promise of war on Japan's behalf, no forward military deployment, no guarantee for Japanese commerce at sea, no Pentagon backing for contested territorial claims.

This would force the Japanese people to debate their security needs, set priorities, and pay the cost. A great nation with global interests situated next to a potentially hostile revanchist state probably should spend more than one percent of GDP on the military. Moreover, Tokyo would have added incentive to improve its relationships with neighboring states. East Asia will more secure if weaker nations work together to constrain the PRC, and Japan already is forging useful ties with India, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Relations with South Korea require concerted effort to improve, something more likely if neither country can rely on America to backstop its security. In this way military necessity might be the most powerful impetus for Japan to downplay historical revisionism.

After 70 years the U.S. should stop playing globocop, especially in regions where powerful, democratic friends such as Japan can do so much more to defend themselves and their neighborhoods. This would be the best way to enhance security and stability not only of the Asia-Pacific, of which the prime minister spoke, but also of America, which is Washington's highest responsibility.

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