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Japan Must Take China Seriously, Even If That Means Arming Up

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Bipartisan sentiments have hardened against China. Although now viewed as a military threat, Beijing does not menace the U.S.—no one imagines a naval armada seizing Hawaii or bombarding California.

The issue is American influence in East Asia and security of allied states, most importantly Japan. The latter danger has been greatly overstated, however. The People's Republic of China has aggressively contested claims to a variety of islands, reefs, and other geographic hotspots, but has not directly threatened any country or challenged the independence of any nation, except Taiwan, which is not recognized by the majority of governments, including America.

Although behaving badly, the PRC is seeking to overturn the results of the "century of humiliation," not create a vast new empire. Beijing has yet to exhibit America's persistent military aggressiveness of recent decades.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration announced a pivot to Asia, or rebalance of U.S. forces. Little came of this new strategy, since American attention and forces remained focused on the Middle East. However, President Donald Trump is making China a key reelection issue and appears to be shifting toward a quasi-Cold War posture, which could result in greater military as well as economic confrontation. For instance, a couple weeks ago the commander of U.S. Forces Japan announced that Washington would help Tokyo monitor "unprecedented" Chinese challenges around the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Yet America's friends and allies are not helpless. To the contrary, several—Australia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, most importantly—are advanced, industrialized states. Indonesia and Vietnam have substantial potential. India is both rising and more involved in the region. Collectively they should be able to restrain Beijing.

The most important single counterweight to the PRC is Japan. The latter long possessed the world's second largest economy. Although China's economy now is upwards of three times as large, Tokyo is far wealthier. Moreover, Japan, unlike Beijing, does not have to spend lavishly on internal security, to ensure people's obedience to an increasingly totalitarian political system.

Unfortunately, Japan also is one of the best exhibits of the serious defects of the U.S.-dominated alliance system. Although American officials constantly demand, complain, whine, and even beg friendly governments to do more militarily, Washington continues to insist on guaranteeing other nations' security even if they do essentially nothing.

Japan is well able to defend itself by making Chinese aggression too expensive to undertake. Tokyo certainly should not expect the U.S. to defend one or another contested set of barren rocks in nearby waters. Washington could, however, still backstop the independence of Japan and other important friendly states.

As in Europe, history long weighed heavily on the role of the World War II aggressor. However, 75 years have passed, and Americans have no obligation to garrison the globe because other nations remain wary of working together. Indeed, even the Philippines, long hostile to a more active role for Japan, has welcomed the latter's expanded military activities, including providing Manila with security assistance.

Despite possessing a GDP in excess of $5 trillion, Tokyo continues to be stingy when it comes to the military. Last year defense outlays were but .95 percent of GDP. That is well below South Korea and Australia and even less than the pitiful Philippines. Only three of 28 European members of NATO devote a smaller share to the military.

Japan still has created a potent military force. Nevertheless, the PRC's edge is growing and Japan relies heavily upon the U.S. Ironically, it was only fear that Washington might someday decouple as Chinese and North Korean military threats increase that caused the Abe government to take more, though still tiny, steps toward a more robust and extensive military role. Observed Mira Rapp-Hooper of the Council on Foreign Relations: "Japan increasingly has to provide for its own defense by Japanese means."

The country's famous "peace constitution," imposed by the U.S. when occupying Japan, technically forbids possession of a military, leading to impossibly arcane and twisted interpretations. For instance, Tokyo created the "Self-Defense Force" while restricting its use to almost nothing. Only a few years back did Tokyo finally decide that the SDF could assist American forces under attack. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe would like to amend the constitution, but so far has been stymied by strong domestic opposition.

Nevertheless, it appears that ever more Japanese realize their neighborhood is getting more dangerous. Observed Defense Minister Taro Kono, foreign military advances mean, "all cards should be on the table."

Tokyo recently received V-22 Ospreys to enhance its combat capabilities and ordered F-35s to better secure its airspace. Although the government unexpectedly suspended the Aegis Ashore missile defense system, Tokyo apparently will shift to an ocean-based platform. Moreover, last month the defense policy committee of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party proposed creating the ability to preempt foreign attack: "New efforts are needed to improve deterrence, including the possession of the ability to defeat ballistic missiles and other weapons, even in the territory of an opponent."

Still, some critics contend that such a step would be unconstitutional. Asaho Mizushima of Waseda University complained: "The Self-Defense Forces are entitled to counterattack only after an opponent violates Japan's territory."

The Abe government is proceeding carefully, given the persistent opposition. A new poll found that half of the public backs acquisition of missiles capable of destroying enemy launch sites. When Kono was asked about respecting Chinese sensibilities, he responded: "At a time when China is enhancing their missiles, why do we need their approval?" Ultimately, Japanese pacifists must decide whether it is better to allow their country to be destroyed than to adapt defense policy to modern realities.

Of course, the Japanese people have the right to adopt whatever policy they wish. However, they shouldn't expect the U.S. to act if they won't.

The Trump administration is trying to shake down Tokyo, turning American service members into de facto mercenaries. Japan provides about $2 billion annually in host nation support for roughly 54,000 U.S. military personnel. However, the biggest cost is not basing the units, but creating them. Every additional defense guarantee requires augmenting force structure. For this Tokyo contributes nothing.

With negotiations set to begin next year, the Trump administration wants Japan to pay $8 billion annually. Japanese officials are horrified by the demand, though they should not be surprised after Washington requested that South Korea pay $5 billion a year to maintain the presence of some 28,500 Americans. Those talks have deadlocked, and nothing is likely to be decided until the U.S. presidential election is decided.

Rather than essentially sell the services of American military personnel, Washington should limit America's exposure to another nation's wars and turn the "mutual" defense treaty into a more modest agreement facilitating military cooperation rather than providing security guarantees. Responsibility for the latter would remain on Tokyo, with the U.S. emphasizing its commitment to Japanese independence. America should enjoy its position of relative geographical invulnerability while being ready to act in the unlikely event that a potential hegemon attempted to control the Asia-Pacific. This would allow the withdrawal of U.S. forces, especially from Okinawa, where residents suffer from a disproportionate basing burden arising from America's occupation of the Japanese island until 1972.

Once Tokyo policymakers understood the limits of Washington's commitment, they could spend however much they wished, without hectoring from America. They, not the U.S., would be responsible for their nation's defense future.

An important aspect of any Japanese effort should be working with like-minded states. The government's recent *Defense of Japan 2020* noted that "a regional cooperation framework in the security realm has not been sufficiently institutionalized in the Indo-Pacific region." Tokyo should improve coordination with Manila and Canberra, which also have reason to worry about North Korea and especially China.

India is another important potential partner concerned about Beijing's future direction. Noted a new report by Mitsuko Hayashi, a visiting fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies: "Defense ties with India have developed in the maritime sphere since the first [maritime SDF] participation in the multilateral Malabar exercise in the Indian Ocean in 2007 but also among the ground services, such as anti-terrorism exercises held in India in 2018 and 2019."

Unfortunately, Tokyo's relations with South Korea remain especially fractious. The U.S. presence is an impediment to cooperation, however, since it allows both Japan and the Republic

of Korea to play the nationalism card for domestic consumption rather than focus on the future and cooperate against the PRC. If Washington refused to cover for such counterproductive behavior, its two leading Asian allies would face greater pressure to behave responsibly.

Even more fundamental is the question of nuclear weapons. Having been the only target of nukes loosed in anger, Japan retains special sensitivity to the issue. However, Washington's policy of "extended deterrence" grows less credible with every improvement in China's nuclear arsenal. Why should any president risk Los Angeles, Seattle, and more for Tokyo? In contrast, an independent Japanese deterrent of even modest size would force Beijing to think very carefully before taking aggressive action against Japan.

Perhaps the most difficult transformation for the Japanese people is being willing to fight if necessary. Grant Newsham, a retired Marine Corps officer who once acted as liaison with the Japanese armed forces, noted the latter's capabilities, but added: "Japan and its military must be prepared to shoot—and that will be huge psychological shift for the SDF and Japanese society writ large."

It no longer is acceptable for Tokyo to subcontract its defense to Washington. In June, Kono observed: "We need to carefully monitor China's intentions, not only their capability." He admitted that financial pressures made it unlikely that Japan would spend a lot more in the next couple years, but he appeared to expect more in the future: "We're just starting with baby steps right now and it will take some time to catch up with the capability of the United States and China." That process would occur be much faster if the U.S. stopped allowing the Japanese government to take the easy way out and rely on America.

The PRC poses an important challenge to the U.S., but much more so to its neighbors. They should take the lead in responding to the resulting threats. Especially Japan. But that will be possible only if Washington steps back. Financial realities, if nothing else, require that Pax Americana come to a close.

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