



## A Little More Money, A Lot More Problems: Japan's Defense Dilemma

**Tokyo is trying to play a much more assertive regional strategic role without developing the necessary military wherewithal to back it up in the event of a crisis.**

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Recent news accounts announce with great fanfare that [Japan's Ministry of Defense is asking for a boost in spending](#), primarily to fortify the country's outlying island chain in the East China Sea that is the focus of a bitter territorial dispute with China. The budgetary request confirms that Tokyo has no intention of compromising regarding the feud over those Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

But the fine print in the news stories also suggests that Japan isn't very serious about creating a more robust military capability to enforce its territorial claims. The requested increase is a mere 2.2 percent, and it would bring Tokyo's annual military outlays up to \$42.38 billion. That is [less than one-third of China's official defense budget of \\$145 billion—which almost no one believes fully accounts for that country's actual military spending](#). Both the Pentagon and independent estimates place the real figure at \$180 billion or more.

This underscores a dangerous disconnect between Tokyo's increasingly strident geostrategic ambitions and its military capabilities. Not only has Japan taken a hard line on the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue, [the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has moved to "reinterpret" article nine of the country's pacifist-leaning constitution to permit Japanese involvement in collective defense efforts](#). The reinterpretation also broadens the definition of what constitutes a threat to Japan's security. It would no longer be confined to an attack on Japanese territory.

All of this is designed to enable Japan to play a more active role in East Asia's security affairs. In addition to such constitutional maneuvering, the Abe government has begun to forge significant military ties with other nations in the region that worry about China's ambitions. [Steps already have included arms sales to Vietnam](#) and [the Philippines](#). [Tokyo has also begun to involve itself in the contentious territorial disputes of the South China Sea](#), even though Japanese interests are only indirectly involved in that region.

The change in military doctrine and the various geopolitical initiatives have generated considerable domestic controversy, [as critics worry that Abe's policies could increase the likelihood of Japan becoming entangled in military conflicts](#). Japan's neighbors, especially China and South Korea, also worry about the possibility of a revival of the Japanese militarism that

scarred East Asia so badly during the first half of the twentieth century. [The hesitance of Japanese officials to acknowledge their country's responsibility](#) for that tragic period has intensified suspicions and worries.

Consequently, Tokyo is on the verge of creating the worst possible combination of policies. It is trying to play a much more assertive regional strategic role without developing the necessary military wherewithal to back it up in the event of a crisis. Worse, it is trying to adopt that more assertive strategic role without taking steps to erase the resentment and uneasiness among key neighbors generated by Japan's earlier imperial abuses.

Japanese leaders need to take three steps to correct these mismatches. One step is to emulate Germany and offer a truly unconditional apology for Tokyo's behavior during the imperial era. [Previous statements, including the latest one by Abe marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II](#), have seemed too conditional and even evasive.

The second step would be to adopt a more conciliatory stance regarding its territorial disputes with both China and South Korea. The legal validity of the rival claims is murky at best. It would be a constructive gesture for Tokyo to compromise with two countries that were victims of Imperial Japan's aggression, even if Japanese claims are perfectly valid. Sometimes a willingness to make concessions on relatively modest issues can lead to better relations and greater gains overall.

Finally, if Japan is determined to play a more vigorous regional strategic role, the Abe government must do a better job of convincing the Japanese people that the new course is warranted and desirable. Moreover, playing such a role requires a much more serious level of military spending than \$42 billion a year—something that is not possible without greater domestic support.

Tokyo's current course creates worrisome dangers for the United States as Japan's ally. The worst scenario would be for an excessively rigid, provocative Japanese geostrategic posture to produce an armed conflict that Japan could not handle by itself. The United States might then find itself in a war, most likely with China, over issues that have little relevance to America's own interests. Before that danger increases further, U.S. leaders need to have a candid discussion with their Japanese counterparts about some necessary constructive initiatives.

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