

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## *Japan Still Sleeps*

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Michael Auslin of AEI [writes](#) at *Foreign Policy* that Japan is changing its defense posture in ways that “will have profound implications for the balance of power in Asia.” I hope this is right but I’m fairly sure it’s wrong.

Last month, while I was in Japan meeting with industry and government leaders, including people close to the Ministry of Defense, I saw no evidence for this thesis. And Auslin’s evidence is somewhat thin.

The article claims that the Japanese government is laying the ground work for a much larger military role in Asia over the next several decades. The pieces of evidence Auslin provides include:

—A deal on realigning the US military presence in Japan that avoids dealing with the biggest sticking point between the two sides (Futenma);

—A smattering of Japanese overseas deployments that Auslin claims have produced “a generation of [Self Defense Force] air, sea, and land officers with extensive operational experience”;

—Japan’s decision to buy the F-35;

—Tokyo’s beginning of a process to revise the proscription on arms exports; and Japanese cooperation with the United States on missile defense.

These developments all indicate some militarization but nothing likely to produce “profound implications for the balance of power in Asia.” Missile defense and experience conducting humanitarian relief operations are all well and good, but they do not buy you the naval wherewithal to prevent China from taking over your sea lanes

Auslin allows that the “overriding challenge” to a more normalized Japanese defense posture is the fact that these changes “lack a coherent political articulation and have not been supported by a national debate over Japan’s role in Asia and in the world.” Beyond that overriding challenge, however, there are a number of problems that could ground this vessel before it gets out of port.

First, demographics. Japan currently is swirling down the demographic drain. By 2040, 14 percent of the Japanese population is projected to be 80 years of age or older, with every 5-year (i.e., 10-14, 15-19, etc) age cohort under 65 shrinking dramatically as compared with the same age group in 2010. Japan is likely to possess 40 percent fewer citizens under 15 and a 30 percent drop in working age population by 2040, placing significant stress on its economy and its pension and health systems. This does not bode well for Japan’s future economic performance and thus for its ability to generate the military investment that would underwrite a more assertive defense policy.

The demographic conundrum, coupled with expansive health care and pension benefits for Japan’s elderly, has built a tumor of structural debt into the Japanese economy. Meanwhile, the economic “lost decade” of the 1990s has turned into something that looks an awful lot like two lost decades. Maybe more. The attitude in Japan among young people is commensurately dyspeptic. Relatedly, the big political issue in Japan today is whether to raise the consumption tax, which is essentially a value-added tax, from 5 percent to 10 percent in order to begin to close the gaping fiscal maw. What this would do, in essence, is redistribute money from high-consumption/low-earning Japanese (the large, politically powerful elderly cohort) toward lower

consumption/higher earning Japanese (the smaller, politically weaker group of younger Japanese). But it is important to understand a) that whether this will happen is still anyone's guess, and b) even were it to pass, it would not come close to patching over the shortfalls in the Japanese welfare state.

In Tokyo, I heard a profound sense of resignation about Japan's ability to take a larger role in providing its own defense, even among defense intellectuals.

When pressed on this point, Japanese security scholars shrug and point at both public opinion and straight-trend line projections of Chinese military spending and argue that they could not possibly keep up. True, but mostly irrelevant.

They don't need to keep up, dollar for dollar; they need to do a limited number of things well. Some of those things they currently do well, like anti-submarine warfare and surveillance, but the China side of the China-Japan balance is shifting rapidly.

As I said, I'd like very much to believe that Japan is going to take on a much larger role in providing for its own security. But as long as Washington defines America's security as coextensive with Japan's, Tokyo would be foolish to stop free riding on America's exertions in Asia.