

The American Conservative

Japanese Pot Calls European Kettle Black

Doug Bandow

June 24, 2021

Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi told European leaders that they should increase the continent's military presence in Asia to help Tokyo put "tremendous pressure" on the People's Republic of China. In return Kishi proposed sending two armored divisions to Europe to help face down a revived Russian Federation.

Hah, hah, hah! Only kidding about the latter. Japan isn't in the armored division business. Or inclined to send Japanese troops overseas. Or even to do that much to constrain Beijing. After all, Tokyo believes that confronting China is primarily America's job. However, the minister would like Europe to join America in helping to defend Japan. Such a deal!

Kishi testified before the European Parliament's committee on security and defense. He urged the European Union to "continue and expand" security cooperation with Japan in the "Indo-Pacific region." He advocated cooperation "against authoritarianism," telling the panel that "I highly commend the point that the EU strategy sets out the strengthening of presence and action in the Indo-Pacific." An unnamed Japanese official told the *South China Morning Post*: "Japan hopes to use this opportunity to get more involvement from the EU in the region."

Apparently, Tokyo isn't satisfied with the defense welfare that it receives from the U.S. Now it hopes the Europeans, who have been as shameless as the Japanese in forever cheap-riding on Washington, to "visibly increase their military presence" in the Indo-Pacific. If Europe went along with his proposal, Japan would become a double-dipper, a notable achievement since it long has devoted less effort to the military even than the Europeans!

Both Europe and Japan should get serious about defense. However, that doesn't mean playacting as if they are prepared to do anything serious for each other.

In practice, Europe is remarkably unconcerned about Vladimir Putin's ambitions, irrespective of what European officials say. Facing a supposedly terrible threat of aggression from the revived Red Army controlled by the new Stalin—or maybe even new Hitler—European governments continue to provide more rhetoric than resources.

Three states with large economies, Germany, Italy, and Spain, don't let their militaries get in the way of their budget plans. Another two, France and the United Kingdom, have real armed forces, but mostly in order to enhance international prestige and manage vestigial colonial empires. The Greeks arm against Turkey, which has become a sometimes-geopolitical mistress to Moscow, NATO's supposed enemy. Even Poland and the Baltic States, which complain incessantly about the supposed Russian threat, can't be bothered to spend much more than a couple cents on the Euro to preserve their independence.

And this disunited group is supposed to help contain China in Asia? Anyone making that argument should bring their routine to Comedy Central.

During the Cold War, Japan faced the Soviet Union, which maintained an active maritime presence, as well as the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong's mad reign, and North Korea, thought to be ever ready to stage a repeat of the Korean War. Yet Tokyo capped its outlays at 1 percent of GDP, even after generating the world's second largest economy.

Japan routinely cited the alleged requirements of the "peace constitution" imposed by the American occupation, but Tokyo officials oft changed their interpretation of famed Article Nine, torturing the language to suit their political preferences. Claiming to be constrained in their own defense enhanced their ability to manipulate the U.S. into acting on Japan's behalf. Now, apparently, the Suga government hopes to do the same with the Europeans.

There is no doubt that the PRC has increased its military strength and used its forces aggressively on behalf of "unilateral attempts to change the [territorial] status quo by coercion," as Kishi put it. But the question is, if his government is so concerned, why doesn't it act?

Elbridge Colby and Jennifer Lind, of the Marathon Initiative and Dartmouth College, respectively, recently observed: "while Japan clearly recognizes this problem, its defense effort has barely budged in response to China's massive military buildup. Generally resisting Washington's urgings to increase its military spending and participation, Japan's defense budget has remained near its long-standing one percent level."

If Tokyo really is so worried about "unilateral attempts to change the [territorial] status quo by coercion," then why isn't it building more missiles, planes, and ships to counter the PRC? If Japan won't invest the real resources necessary to improve its security, and protect the useless rocks that constitute the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, why should America intervene?

The best that can be said for Tokyo is that it has made minor improvements in response to obvious pressure. China has undertaken a dramatic military buildup, North Korea has developed nuclear weapons and missiles, and Americans have grown tired of endless wars and a defense policy that has turned the Pentagon into a de facto welfare agency.

Yet the changes remain minimal. Beset by international challenges last year Japan spent a whopping *1.01 percent* of its GDP on the military. That was up dramatically from *.95 percent* the preceding year and allowed Tokyo to edge ahead of the Philippines, which is at *.99 percent*. In Japan this *.06 percent* increase counts as an "arms buildup." Moreover, in 2015 Tokyo changed

its military guidelines so that it can now come to defense of American naval vessels—which, of course, always were expected to protect Japanese forces. At the time this was praised as a major, almost unfathomable step forward.

Tokyo's lack of serious military effort has two possible explanations. The first is that its people believe they face no serious military threats. In fact, Beijing has shown no interest in conquering the nation of Japan. However, the PRC does assert ownership over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and no doubt would grab them if it could do so without interference. Moreover, while the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has no logical reason to attack Japan, that fact alone offers little assurance of safety. The latter would be taking a serious risk if it lacked any defense capabilities.

The alternative explanation is that Tokyo figures that someone else will take care of their problems. Although that someone else traditionally has been Uncle Sucker, for Japan it really doesn't matter who. Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, or the Great Pumpkin would be fine, as long as they were suitably armed. Or the Europeans, if they could be convinced to act.

However, if there is a definition of lost cause, it is the latter. After all, the Europeans play the same game with America. They complain about Russian behavior and insist that Washington do something about it, yet the median NATO member devotes 1.72 percent of GDP to its military. Eastern Europeans are particularly insistent that the U.S. do more while they top out around 2 percent, as if that demonstrates heroic sacrifice on behalf of independence and liberty.

European governments and peoples either believe there is no threat or that America will do whatever is necessary to protect them. They lagged in military outlays even at the height of the Cold War. Having always taken the position that someone else should take care of them, the Europeans are unlikely to build up their forces to help protect Japan.

That is not an argument against cooperation to meet common threats. However, what Kishi proposed is not cooperation. Tokyo is looking for another great power to supplement the limited Japanese military forces. Getting Europe involved would create another welcome source of defense welfare for Tokyo. Which would further reduce pressure on the latter to do more for itself.

Europe and Japan should concentrate on addressing their own security needs first. If they don't protect themselves they aren't in much condition to aid others. Once they meet their own defense requirements they could help address the needs of others.

This principle also should animate U.S. policy. Washington should expect other governments to make their own defense a priority before they become supplicants to America. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, both Europe and Japan were vulnerable to Soviet attack. Hence the birth of NATO and Mutual Defense Treaty with Tokyo. However, the need for America's defense of Europe has faded. So too of Japan.

The next time Kishi visits Europe and speaks to the European Parliament, he should report on what Japan is doing to enhance Asian security. The highlights should be his discussion of

increased military outlays, enhanced defense production, and expanded regional cooperation—plus a proposal for Japanese-European consultations over Russia’s malign activities. Then Tokyo could credibly request European aid in confronting China.

Beijing’s rise has dramatically transformed the international security environment. The Cold War paradigm whereby the entire “free world” relied on U.S. military protection is outdated. The new paradigm should be democratic states stepping up to defend themselves and others, not asking others for military charity. That includes Japan.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.