



[Return to the Article](#)

April 8, 2010

Tokyo Rising

By [Ted Galen Carpenter](#)

One very clear fact emerged from my recent meetings with officials and foreign-policy scholars in Australia and New Zealand: even though both countries have major economic stakes in their relationship with China, they are exceedingly nervous about the possibility of Chinese hegemony in East Asia. Since most of them also are reaching the (reluctant) conclusion that the United States will not be able to afford indefinitely the financial burden and military requirements of remaining the region's security stabilizer, a role the United States has played since the end of World War II, they are looking for other options to blunt China's emerging preeminence.

Increasingly, policy makers and opinion leaders in Australia and New Zealand seem receptive to the prospect of both India and Japan playing more active security roles in the region, thereby acting as strategic counterweights to China. That is a major shift in sentiment from just a decade or two ago. The notion of India as a relevant security player is a recent phenomenon, but there did not appear to be any opposition in Canberra or Wellington to the Indian navy flexing its muscles in the Strait of Malacca in the past few years. That favorable reaction was apparent even in vehemently anti-nuclear New Zealand, despite India's decision in the late 1990s to deploy a nuclear arsenal, which dealt a severe blow to the global nonproliferation cause.

Even more surprising is the reversal of attitudes regarding a more robust military role for Japan. When I was in Australia in the 1990s, scholars and officials were adamantly opposed to any move by Tokyo away from the tepid military posture it had adopted after World War II. The belief that Japan should play only a severely constrained security role—under Washington's strict supervision—was the conventional wisdom not only in Australia, but throughout East Asia.

And U.S. officials shared that view. Major General Henry Stackpole, onetime commander of U.S. Marine forces in Japan, stated bluntly that "no one wants a rearmed, resurgent Japan." He added that the United States was "the cap in the bottle" preventing that outcome. The initial draft of the Pentagon's policy planning guidance document, leaked to the New York Times, warned that a larger Japanese security role in East Asia would be destabilizing, and that Washington ought to discourage such a development.

U.S. policy makers appear to have warmed gradually to a more robust Japanese military stance. That was certainly true during the administration of George W. Bush, when officials clearly sought to make the alliance with Japan a far more equal partnership.

Yet some distrust of Japanese intentions lingers, both in the United States and portions of East Asia. The wariness about Japan as a more active military player is strongest in such countries as the Philippines

and South Korea. The former endured a brutal occupation during World War II, and the latter still bears severe emotional scars from Tokyo's heavy-handed behavior as Korea's colonial master.

Even in those countries, though, the intensity of the opposition to Japan becoming a normal great power and playing a more serious security role is waning. And in the rest of the region, the response to that prospect ranges from receptive to enthusiastic. That emerging realism is encouraging. The alternative to Japan and India (and possibly other actors, such as Indonesia and Vietnam) becoming strategic counterweights to a rising China ought to be worrisome. Given America's gradually waning hegemony, a failure by other major countries to step up and be significant security players would lead to a troubling power vacuum in the region. A vacuum that China would be well-positioned to fill.

If China does not succumb to internal weaknesses (which are not trivial), it will almost certainly be the most prominent power in East Asia in the coming decades, gradually displacing the United States. But there is a big difference between being the leading power and being a hegemon. The latter is a result that Americans cannot welcome.

The emergence of a multipolar power system in East Asia is the best outcome both for the United States and China's neighbors. It is gratifying that nations in the region seem to be reaching that conclusion. Australia and New Zealand may be a little ahead of the curve in that process, but the attitude in those countries about the desirability of Japan and India adopting more active security roles is not unique. Washington should embrace a similar view.

checkTextResizerCookie('article_body');

[Ted Galen Carpenter](#) is vice president for defense and foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute.

Page Printed from: http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2010/04/08/tokyo_rising_98909.html at April 09, 2010 - 09:53:02 AM CDT