

Maaïke Okano-Heijmans

Japan's Security Posture in Asia: Changing tactics or strategy?

Recent and on-going shifts in Japan's military security are once again stirring the debate about whether Japan's security posture is set for radical change. Will Japan move away from its *comprehensive security* policy that directly links security to politics, economics – and, more recently, to the environment and individuals – and rather opt for the more traditional *military security* approach, familiar in the United States? Certainly, a casual observer could be forgiven for interpreting recent changes on Japan's security and defence policy agenda as a sign of such change. In December 2010 Japan's Security Council and the Cabinet adopted new defense guidelines aiming for a transformation towards a "dynamic defense force". A year later the decades-old weapons export ban was eased and plans to relax curbs on the use of military force by Japan's Self-Defense Force units engaged in UN peace-keeping operations are currently being discussed. Japan's greater assertiveness in the military security field is also discernable in relations with other countries. The United States and Japan have in recent years and on various occasions underlined the importance of the US-Japan security alliance, agreeing to intensify defense cooperation and security in Asia. At the same time Tokyo is strengthening defense ties with other countries in the region, including Australia and India.

While these are clear signals that the Japanese government is slowly but steadily broadening its approach towards security, this does not necessarily imply that Japan is substantially altering its traditional comprehensive security approach. Indeed, recent policies towards North Korea, Iran, Myanmar/Burma and Afghanistan, as well as new security issues on the regional and global agenda suggest that Tokyo is *not* shifting away from its longtime comprehensive security policy. New activism on the military security front is accompanied by an enhanced government posture on economic security, characterized by a greater willingness to take a more outspoken and obstructionist stance, as well as renewed investments in economic diplomacy that also aim to enhance sustainable development and regional stability. Political-economic thinking among Japanese elites thus remains an essential part of

No. 125 – JULY 2012

Abstract

Recent and ongoing shifts in Japan's military security – both domestic and in relations with other countries – are once again stirring the debate about whether Japan's security posture is set for radical change. Japan's recent policies towards North Korea, Myanmar/Burma, Iran and Afghanistan as well as new security issues suggest, however, that change is continuative. Increased investments in the military field go hand in hand with an enhanced government posture in economic security, both positively by supporting sustainable development and stability in the region and negatively in terms of (aid) sanctioning. While hedging against a rising China and a retreating United States, Japan is not shifting away from its long-time policy of comprehensive security. Military security is slowly broadened, but not at the expense of the close links between economics and security that have characterized the Japanese approach of the postwar period. Ongoing developments in Japan's security posture are thus a change in tactics rather than strategy

Maaïke Okano-Heijmans, Research Fellow, Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, The Hague, Netherlands

(*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

Japan's comprehensive security policy. As Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook of 2012 puts it: it is important both «to minimize risks and maximize opportunities for growth in the Asia-Pacific».

Growing investments in Japan's military security are a result of a pragmatist-realist policy that hedges against a rising China and retreating United States. Assessing these changes in their larger context – including the political-economic front – suggests that on-going developments in Japan's security posture are a change in *tactics rather than strategy*, i.e. Japan's posture is evolving but remains fundamentally in line with the approach that has characterized Japanese security and defence policies throughout the postwar period.

Policy in flux

Japan's comprehensive security (*sōgō-anzen-hoshō*) policy was developed in the 1980s and emphasizes economic and diplomatic rather than military means to protect Japan's national security. The policy is based on the premise that economic/commercial interests and political strategic interests reinforce one another, and should thus be seen in tandem. Since the late 1980s comprehensive security also came to involve an environmental element. This was indicative of Japan's evolving posture and view that scarcity of natural resources – food, water, energy – is directly related to stability, economic security and sustainable development. In the late 1990s Japan furthermore added the concept of so-called “*human security*” – an approach to security with human economic well-being and safety and at the centre – to its foreign and security policy strategies. Seeking to contribute to securing basic human needs, the new emphasis on human security can be regarded as a continuation of Japan's comprehensive security policy that regards a stable living environment and economic growth as an integral whole.

From the outset, Japan's comprehensive security policy entailed a move beyond the emphasis on the military-economic linkage that transformed European states into established powers¹. It also contrasts with the military security approach that characterises US foreign and security policies. As is well documented, the Japanese “peace constitution” (Article 9) and security guarantee provided by Washington facilitated and reinforced Tokyo's comprehensive security approach.

Triggers of Change

With the domestic economy, the US-Japan alliance and the US role in global affairs in flux, it is not surprising that Japanese policies have continued to evolve in recent years. The Japanese government is adjusting to the new reality wherein the hegemonic presence of the United States will be a more negotiated system, entailing a more pluralistic organization of power and influence². Japanese politicians and policymakers are having another look at the economic and military benefits of the alliance and reconsidering their policies. Looking at ongoing power shifts from the opposite perspective, it is clear that Japan's comprehensive security approach requires adjustments in light of changing power balances within East Asia, wherein China is increasingly on the agenda of all countries. Uncertain about the direction of China's economic and military build-up, the Japanese government is strengthening its capabilities on both fronts³.

¹ Tilly argues that the expansion of military force drove the processes of state formation in Europe; see C. TILLY, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990*, Cambridge, MA, Basil Blackwell, 1990.

² For an analysis of the changing US hegemony and role in East Asia and the interaction between subsystems of economics and security therein, see for example G.J. IKENBERRY – T. INOBUCHI, *Introduction*, in *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2010, pp. 383-388.

³ For a detailed analysis of Japan's security strategy options against the context of a rising China, see: *Japan's Security Policy towards China: Integration, Balancing and Deterrence in an Era of Power Shift*, Policy Paper, Tokyo: The Tokyo Foundation, October 2011.

Much like Japan's trilaterals, the evolvement of Japan's comprehensive security approach on both the economic and military security ends aims to provide the country with more flexibility, serving as a hedge – both against China and a retreating United States⁴. Japan's changing tactics must be regarded also as an effort on the part of Japan to support an effective US military presence and emphasis on Asia's security⁵. Rather than delving deeper into the motivations of adjustments in Japan's policies, however, this short paper will address the direction of such change.

Revolution or evolution?

The debate on Japan's changing posture in international politics, economics and security is often framed in terms of whether Japan is in a transformative phase or, alternatively, “normalizing” or converging towards neo-liberal (Anglo-American) norms⁶. Looking at this debate from a political-economic perspective, Linda Weiss has argued that the Japanese state is “*adapting, dismantling and innovating*”, rather than substantially changing⁷. On the security front, however, Christopher Hughes suggests that the Japanese government is «losing faith in [its comprehensive security] approach and concentrating instead on the military security dimension»⁸. Linus Hagström disagrees with the idea of Japanese exceptionalism all together, pointing out that Tokyo does not shy away from taking a security policy hard line when this suits its interests⁹.

Arguments on change in Japan's foreign policy and diplomacy also run in different directions, with some positing that change is continuative and others saying that Japan is undergoing substantial change. On the one hand, Kenneth Pyle argues that Japan's foreign policy will be very different from the grand strategy that Prime Minister Yoshida pioneered in the 1950s¹⁰. Richard Samuels, however, suggests that change will be continuative, involving into a reformulation rather than abandonment of the Yoshida Doctrine¹¹. Essentially these debates boil down to the one question: are the changes in Japan's security approach strategic or tactical? Addressing this puzzle with an eye on Japan's security posture in Asia, requires a closer look at policies and activities on both the political economic and the military security fronts. The point of departure is that Japan's traditional preference for positive inducements have in recent years been accompanied by a greater willingness to resort to more blunt instruments of foreign policy, both military and economic. As hesitance to openly adhere to a (military) “stick” is weakening, there is little doubt that the notion of comprehensive security is subject to partial reinterpretation. But how substantial is the shift in Japan's security posture in Asia?

Japan in Asia

A closer look at specific hot spots in Asia provides further insight into continuity and change in Japan's approach to security. How has the Japanese government – in cooperation with other actors – responded on various instances where regional stability was at stake? Obvious cases to look at in this regard are North Korea, Iran, Myanmar/Burma and Afghanistan, as well as new security issues

⁴ B. GLOSSERMAN, (*H*)edging toward trilateralism: Japanese Foreign Policy in an Uncertain World, ISPI Analysis, No. 84, December 2011.

⁵ K. JIMBO, *Japan, and ASEAN's maritime security infrastructure*, in «East Asia Forum», 3 June 2012.

⁶ While this paper takes military-strategic changes as a starting point, the question can also be addressed from an economic security perspective. See for example MAIKE OKANO-HEIJMANS, *Japan's New Economic Diplomacy: Changing Tactics or Strategy?*, in «Asia-Pacific Review», vol. 19, no. 1, 2012, pp. 62-87.

⁷ L. WEISS, *Developmental States in transition: adapting, dismantling, innovating, not “normalizing”*, in «The Pacific Review», vol. 13, no. 1, 2000, pp. 21-55.

⁸ C.W. HUGHES, *Japan's Security Agenda: Military, Economic, and Environmental Dimensions*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004, p. 208.

⁹ L. HAGSTRÖM, *Critiquing the Idea of Japanese Exceptionalism: Japan and the Coordination of North Korea Policy*, in «European Journal of East Asian Studies», vol. 7, no. 1, 2008, pp. 131-154.

¹⁰ K.B. PYLE, *Japan Rising: the resurgence of Japanese power and purpose*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2007.

¹¹ R.J. SAMUELS, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's grand strategy and the future of East Asia*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2007.

on the regional and global agenda, such as maritime security and outer space. North Korea is presently the state under the heaviest sanctions imposed by Japanese law and international regulations¹². While the United States enforced sanctions on North Korea in 1950, serious discussion to impose sanctions started in Japan only after the firing of the Taepodong missile in 1998. It was not until 2004 that laws for unilateral sanctions were in place. Until the early 1990s the Japanese government had tried to engage Pyongyang economically in various ways. The subsequent hardening of Tokyo's stance appears to stem from the experience that North Korean rulers are rather willing to preserve the status quo. Consequently, Japan started to use the North Korean threat to justify its controversial military enhancement in a context of uncertainty about the United States' commitment and an increasingly stronger China. While pointing to North Korea as the greatest threat to its national security¹³. Japan is stepping up its national defence, deploying anti-ballistic missile units in Tokyo, testing its missile interceptor system and strengthening the US-Japan alliance.

Foreign policy rhetoric in Tokyo's policymaking circles suggests that North Korea is the primary reason to beef up Japan's military security. In practice, however, the Japanese government largely resorts to economic tools to deal with Pyongyang. That is to say, Tokyo's actual policies towards North Korea primarily involve economic rather than military security means. They are essentially about withholding economic benefits, including trade, humanitarian aid, and other assistance that would come available with the normalisation of diplomatic relations¹⁴. What is furthermore remarkable is that the Japanese government increases pressure on Pyongyang by postponing and obstructing talks – both in the bilateral and multilateral settings, including the Six Party Talks. Obviously, Japan is not the only country to do so – one could rightly argue that Pyongyang has been obstructing talks – but the point that is alluded to here is that Japan should *also* be regarded as a spoiler in this setting.

Economic dimension evolving

Sanctions and negative economic diplomacy towards North Korea are in a sense a rather exceptional case of bold power play on the part of Japan. There is, however, no lack of other instances where security challenges are played out through a mix of positive and negative economic diplomacy. Military brinkmanship remains by and large unseen. The cases of Iran and Myanmar/Burma, for example, show willingness on the part of Japan to employ negative sanctions, notably suspension of aid. While the Japanese government still prefers to engage these countries economically, it has in the past decade been increasingly willing to employ punitive measures of its own and to concur with international sanctions. Even then, however, sanctioning has gone hand in hand with positive inducements, including the promotion of infrastructure, that also contribute to sustainable development and regional stability¹⁵. While warning that Iran's refusal to abide by UN resolutions would lead to stronger action, Tokyo maintained relatively cordial relations with Tehran and exercised restraint in joining sanctions as tensions rose in recent years¹⁶. As a way of addressing tensions surrounding the country's nuclear programme, Japan offered to construct and pay for five nuclear plants and to ship highly-enriched uranium to Iran¹⁷. In 2004 the government invested in an oil field development project in Azadegan, but in 2010 withdrew investments amid rising interna-

¹² Sanctions have been either unilaterally imposed under domestic legislation or passed in conformation with UN resolutions.

¹³ See various issues of the annual *Diplomatic Bluebook*, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and *Defence of Japan*, Japan's Ministry of Defence (before 2007, Defence Agency).

¹⁴ MAAIKE OKANO-HEIJMANS, *Troubled Neighbours: Japan's Negative Economic Diplomacy towards North Korea*, in «European Journal of East Asian Studies», vol. 9, no. 2, 2010, pp. 363-394. See also L. Hagström, *Critiquing the Idea of Japanese Exceptionalism*, ...cit.

¹⁵ For more on this see MAAIKE OKANO-HEIJMANS, *Japan's 'Green' Economic Diplomacy: environmental and energy technology in foreign relations*, IN «The Pacific Review», vol. 25, no. 3, 2012.

¹⁶ Until China gained foothold in Iran in recent years, Japan was the country's third-largest trading partner and the leading consumer of Iranian oil, Japan's third largest supplier.

¹⁷ Press TV, "Iran ready to accept Japan's nuclear offer", 26 February 2010.

tional tensions and possible US sanctions over Tehran's nuclear activities. As Iran failed to respond to calls to stop its nuclear programme, Japan in mid-2010 sided with the United States and other allies to support fresh UN sanctions, while steadily reducing oil imports from the country. Seeking to balance the stable supply of oil supply with good alliance relations, however, Tokyo successfully negotiated an exemption from new US financial sanctions for Japanese banks in March 2012.

With regard to Myanmar/Burma, the Japanese government showed willingness to join international sanctions and cancelled an aid grant in 2007. However, Japan's preference for a more positive approach is clear from the announcement in November 2011 of Tokyo's intention to assist the economic development of Myanmar through economic cooperation and investment. Tokyo's pledge came just prior to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's ground-breaking visit to the reclusive state, which signified the beginning of a more open, cooperative approach of Western countries following a series of reformist moves by the Myanmar's military leadership.

Another example of the integrative Japanese approach is the case of Afghanistan. Japan's policies towards Afghanistan aim at enhancing security, assisting with reconciliation and reintegration, and at promoting economic development. Japan has between 2001 and 2001 been the second-largest investor in Afghanistan. Its involvement, it has been argued, has been "*conspicuous, however, for its lack of deployed combat personnel*"¹⁸. A military approach to security in Afghanistan seems increasingly discernable but Japan's activities are still largely characterized by an economic security approach. All of this conforms with the assessment that while the Japanese government may take punitive measures against countries that represent strong economic interests for Japan, it generally resumes aid to these countries as soon as possible¹⁹. This is evidence of Japan's continued adherence to a comprehensive security approach, in which bold power play – military or economic – remains primarily a default strategy.

New security areas

Japan's policies in regional and global security, including in new areas, such as maritime, outer space and cyberspace security, further illustrate the widening of, rather than shift away, from Tokyo's above-mentioned comprehensive approach towards security. There can be little doubt that the lifting of Japan's ban on the military use of outer space in 2008 was indicative for a desire to have greater room of maneuver as traditional security challenges grow. Still, Japanese activities in the field of outer space mainly focus on actively promoting international cooperation and supporting emerging countries in particular through ODA projects²⁰. The same is true for Tokyo's maritime policies in general and policies in the South China Sea and East China Sea- currently serving as major flashpoints in the region- in particular. Helping to build ASEAN's maritime security capacities is becoming a key focus for the Japanese government, which aims to strengthen connectivity between Japan's aid and regional security. Rather than directly focusing on military security, however, the emphasis is on supporting critical infrastructure such as (air)ports, roads, (electric) power generation stations and software development that serves the defense sector of these countries²¹.

¹⁸ M. VENNING, *NATO-Japan Strategic Partnership*, IN «RUSI Newsbrief», 27 March 2012.

¹⁹ L. NIKITINA - FUMITAKA FURUOKA, *Japan's Foreign Aid Sanctions Policy after the End of Cold War*, MPRA Paper 6757, 2008.

²⁰ KOICHIRO GEMBA, "Japan's efforts in the global agenda: implementing 'full cast diplomacy' and expanding the frontiers of international cooperation", *Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)*, 28 February 2012.

²¹ NOBORU YAMAGUCHI, *America's "Return" to Asia Requires Japan's Strategic Response*, AJISS-Commentary No.147, April 2012.

To sum up, it is fair to say that to singly emphasize developments in military security does not do justice to the shifts in Japan's security posture in Asia, which are taking place both in the defense field and on the economic front. The Japanese government is taking a more pro-active stance in military security and increasingly willing to opt for forceful instruments of economic diplomacy, while at the same time investing heavily in positive, economic means to secure stability and prosperity in the Asian region. Policies and activities largely emphasize economic security elements and show a continued preference to maximize Japan's interests through cooperative ways.

Conclusion

As this brief analysis of Japan's policies towards North Korea, Iran, Myanmar/Burma, Afghanistan and new security areas has shown, the strengthening and restructuring of Japan's military capabilities since the 1990s does not take place at the expense of diplomatic and economic means. Japan is also broadening its tool-kit of power projection on the economic front, including – positively – in the environmental field by supporting sustainable development, and – negatively – in terms of (aid) sanctioning. Developments in Japan's defense posture should thus not be seen to reflect a gradual retreat from using economic power for security ends. Rather, they are part of an evolving approach to comprehensive security, in the process of which new capabilities and policies are incorporated on all fronts.

Japan's reconsideration of security and defence policy tactics should be seen as a pragmatic reorientation in response to the changing regional economic and security environment. The repositioning of China and the United States serve as the main triggers, as these are the primary drivers behind on-going shifts in the geo-strategic and economic power balances between countries in East Asia. While referring to North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes as a security threat, Japan takes the opportunity to enhance its regional posture and strengthen its military capabilities. And while showing an increased willingness to follow Western sanctions in the cases of Myanmar and Iran, and being more militarily engaged in Afghanistan, the preference in each of these cases remains for a cooperative approach wherein sustainable economic development contributes to regional stability.

At the risk of stating the obvious it might be added that the case studies presented here also suggest that Japan is not conforming to an Anglo-American neoliberal norm, but, rather, is going through a transformative phase. Japanese policies engage and challenge the "Western consensus" by linking ideational and rationalist materialist factors²². Governments of Western countries would do well to learn from the example of continuity and change in Japan, not least in shaping their expectations of and policies towards China.

La ricerca ISPI analizza le dinamiche politiche, strategiche ed economiche del sistema internazionale con il duplice obiettivo di informare e di orientare le scelte di policy.

I risultati della ricerca vengono divulgati attraverso pubblicazioni ed eventi, focalizzati su tematiche di particolare interesse per l'Italia e le sue relazioni internazionali e articolati in:

- ✓ Programma Africa
- ✓ Programma Caucaso e Asia Centrale
- ✓ Programma Europa
- ✓ Programma Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente
- ✓ Programma Russia e Vicini Orientali
- ✓ Programma Sicurezza e Studi Strategici
- ✓ Progetto Argentina
- ✓ Progetto Asia Meridionale
- ✓ Progetto Cina e Asia Orientale
- ✓ Progetto Diritti Umani
- ✓ Progetto Disarmo
- ✓ Progetto Internazionale - Pubblicazione della Pubblica Amministrazione

Le pubblicazioni online dell'ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

ISPI
Palazzo Clerici
Via Clerici, 5
I - 20121 Milano

www.ispionline.it

© ISPI 2012

²² Sato and Hirata make a similar argument based on research in other fields. See: YOICHIRO SATO - KEIKO HIRATA (eds), *Norms, Interests, and Power in Japanese Foreign Policy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.