
Japan's Cautious Hawks

Why Tokyo Is Unlikely to Pursue an Aggressive Foreign Policy

Gerald L. Curtis

The Japanese have thought about foreign policy in similar terms since the latter half of the nineteenth century. The men who came to power after the 1868 Meiji Restoration set out to design a grand strategy that would protect their country against the existential threat posed by Western imperialism. They were driven not, as their American contemporaries were, to achieve what they believed to be their manifest destiny nor, like the French, to spread wide the virtues of their civilization. The challenge they faced—and met—was to ensure Japan's survival in an international system created and dominated by more powerful countries.

That quest for survival remains the hallmark of Japanese foreign policy today. Tokyo has sought to advance its interests not by defining the international agenda, propagating a particular ideology, or promoting its own vision of world order, the way the United States and other great powers have. Its approach has instead been to take its external environment as a given and then make pragmatic adjustments to keep in step with what the Japanese sometimes refer to as “the trends of the time.”

Ever since World War II, that pragmatism has kept Japan in an alliance with the United States, enabling it to limit its military's role to self-defense. Now, however, as China grows ever stronger, as North Korea continues to build its nuclear weapons capability, and as the United States' economic woes have called into question the sustainability of American primacy in East Asia, the Japanese are revisiting their previous calculations. In particular, a growing chorus of voices on the right are advocating a more autonomous and assertive

GERALD L. CURTIS is Burgess Professor of Political Science at Columbia University.

foreign policy, posing a serious challenge to the centrists, who have until recently shaped Japanese strategy.

In parliamentary elections this past December, the Liberal Democratic Party and its leader, Shinzo Abe, who had previously served as

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prime minister in 2006–7, returned to power with a comfortable majority. Along with its coalition partner, the New Komeito Party, the LDP secured the two-thirds of seats needed to pass legislation rejected by the House of Councilors, the Japanese Diet's upper house. Abe's victory was the result not of his or his party's popularity but rather of the voters' loss of confi-

dence in the rival Democratic Party of Japan. Whatever the public's motivations, however, the election has given Japan a right-leaning government and a prime minister whose goals include scrapping the constitutional constraints on Japan's military, revising the educational system to instill a stronger sense of patriotism in the country's youth, and securing for Tokyo a larger leadership role in regional and world affairs. To many observers, Japan seems to be on the cusp of a sharp rightward shift.

But such a change is unlikely. The Japanese public remains risk averse, and its leaders cautious. Since taking office, Abe has focused his attention on reviving Japan's stagnant economy. He has pushed his hawkish and revisionist views to the sidelines, in part to avoid having to deal with divisive foreign policy issues until after this summer's elections for the House of Councilors. If his party can secure a majority of seats in that chamber, which it does not currently have, Abe may then try to press his revisionist views. But any provocative actions would have consequences. If, for example, he were to rescind statements by previous governments that apologized for Japan's actions in World War II, as he has repeatedly said he would like to do, he not only would invite a crisis in relations with China and South Korea but would face strong criticism from the United States as well. The domestic political consequences are easy to predict: Abe would be flayed in the mass media, lose support among the Japanese public, and encounter opposition from others in his own party.

In short, chances are that those who expect a dramatic change in Japanese strategy will be proved wrong. Still, much depends on what Washington does. The key is whether the United States continues to maintain a dominant position in East Asia. If it does, and if the Japanese believe that the United States' commitment to protect Japan remains credible, then Tokyo's foreign policy will not likely veer off its current track. If, however, Japan begins to doubt the United States' resolve, it will be tempted to strike out on its own.

The United States has an interest in Japan's strengthening its defensive capabilities in the context of a close U.S.-Japanese alliance. But Americans who want Japan to abandon the constitutional restraints on its military and take on a greater role in regional security should be careful what they wish for. A major Japanese rearmament would spur an arms race in Asia, heighten regional tensions (including between Japan and South Korea, another key U.S. ally), and threaten to draw Washington into conflicts that do not affect vital U.S. interests. The United States needs a policy that encourages Japan to do more in its own defense but does not undermine the credibility of U.S. commitments to the country or the region.

PLUS ÇA CHANGE

For many years now, pundits have been declaring that Japan is moments away from once again becoming a great military power. In 1987, no less an eminence than Henry Kissinger saw Tokyo's decision to break the ceiling of one percent of GNP for defense spending, which had been its policy since 1976, as making it "inevitable that Japan will emerge as a major military power in the not-too-distant future." But Japan's defense budget climbed to only 1.004 percent of GNP that year, and it fell below the threshold again the following year. Today, the ceiling is no longer official government policy, but Tokyo still keeps its defense spending at or slightly below one percent of GNP. What is more, its defense budget has shrunk in each of the last 11 years. Although Abe has pledged to reverse this trend, Japan's fiscal problems all but guarantee that any increase in military spending will be modest.

That Japan's military spending has remained where it is points to a larger pattern. Neither the end of the Cold War nor China's emergence as a great power has caused Japan to scuttle the basic tenets of the foreign policy set by Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida following the end of World War II. That policy stressed that Japan should rely on

the United States for its security, which would allow Tokyo to keep its defense spending low and focus on economic growth.

To be sure, Japanese security policy has changed greatly since Yoshida was in power. Japan has stretched the limits of Article 9 of its constitution, which renounces the right to wage war, making it possible for the Self-Defense Forces to develop capabilities and take on missions that were previously prohibited. It has deployed a ballistic missile defense system, its navy patrols sea-lanes in the East China Sea and helps combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden, and Japanese troops have joined UN peacekeeping operations from Cambodia to the Golan Heights. Spending one percent of GNP on its military still gives Japan, considering the size of its economy, the sixth-largest defense budget in the world. And despite the constitutional limits on their missions, Japan's armed forces have become strong and technologically advanced.

Yet the strategy that Yoshida designed so many years ago continues to constrain Japanese policy. Japan still lacks the capabilities needed for offensive military operations, and Article 9 remains the law of the land. Meanwhile, Tokyo's interpretation of that article as banning the use of force in defense of another country keeps Japan from participating more in regional and global security affairs. Abe has indicated his desire to change that interpretation, but he is proceeding cautiously, aware that doing so would trigger intense opposition from neighboring countries and divide Japanese public opinion.

The durability of Yoshida's foreign policy has puzzled not just observers; the architect of the strategy was himself dismayed by its staying power. Yoshida was a realist who believed that the dire circumstances Japan faced after the war left it no choice but to prioritize economic recovery over building up its military power. Yet he expected that policy to change when Japan became economically strong.

The Japanese public, however, saw things differently. As Japan boomed under the U.S. security umbrella, its citizens became content to ignore the left's warnings that the alliance would embroil the country in the United States' military adventures and the right's fears that Japan risked abandonment by outsourcing its defense to the United States. Yoshida's strategy, crafted to advance Japan's interests when the country was weak, became even more popular in good times. And that remains true today: in a 2012 survey conducted by Japan's Cabinet Office, for example, a record high of 81.2 percent of respondents expressed support for the alliance with the United States. Only



This island is my island: the governor of Tokyo on Okinotori Island, May 2005

23.4 percent said that Japan's security was threatened by its having insufficient military power of its own.

It is worth noting that Japan's opposition to becoming a leading military power cannot be chalked up to pacifism. After all, it would be an odd definition of pacifism that included support for a military alliance that requires the United States to take up arms, including nuclear weapons, if necessary, to defend Japan. Most Japanese do not and never have rejected the use of force to protect their country; what they have resisted is the unbridled use of force by Japan itself. The public fears that without restrictions on the military's capabilities and missions, Japan would face heightened tensions with neighboring countries and could find itself embroiled in foreign wars. There is also the lingering concern that political leaders might lose control over the military, raising the specter of a return to the militaristic policies of the 1930s.

Furthermore, the Japanese public and Japan's political leaders are keenly aware that the country's security still hinges on the United

States' dominant military position in East Asia. Some on the far right would like to see Japan develop the full range of armaments, including nuclear weapons, in a push to regain its autonomy and return the country to the ranks of the world's great powers. But the conservative mainstream still believes that a strong alliance with the United States is the best guarantor of Japan's security.

ISLANDS IN THE SUN

Given Japan's pragmatic approach to foreign policy, it should come as no surprise that the country has reacted cautiously to a changing international environment defined by China's rise. Tokyo has doubled down on its strategy of deepening its alliance with the United States; sought to strengthen its relations with countries on China's periphery; and pursued closer economic, political, and cultural ties with China itself. The one development that could unhinge this strategy would be a loss of confidence in the U.S. commitment to Japan's defense.

It is not difficult to imagine scenarios that would test the U.S.-Japanese alliance; what is difficult to imagine are realistic ones. The exception is the very real danger that the dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands (known as the Diaoyu Islands in China), in the East China Sea, might get out of hand, leading to nationalist outbursts in both countries. Beijing and Tokyo would find this tension difficult to contain, and political leaders on both sides could seek to exploit it to shore up their own popularity. Depending on how events unfolded, the United States could well become caught in the middle, torn between its obligation to defend Japan and its opposition to actions, both Chinese and Japanese, that could increase the dangers of a military clash.

The Japanese government, which took control of the uninhabited islands in 1895, maintains that its sovereignty over them is incontestable; as a matter of policy, it has refused to acknowledge that there is even a dispute about the matter. The United States, for its part, recognizes the islands to be under Japanese administrative control but regards the issue of sovereignty as a matter to be resolved through bilateral negotiations between China and Japan. Article 5 of the U.S.-Japanese security treaty, however, commits the United States to "act to meet the common danger" in the event of "an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan." Washington, in other words, would be obligated to support

Tokyo in a conflict over the islands—even though it does not recognize Japanese sovereignty there.

The distinction between sovereignty and administrative control would matter little so long as a conflict over the islands were the result of aggression on the part of China. But the most recent flare-up was precipitated not by Chinese but by Japanese actions. In April 2012, Tokyo's nationalist governor, Shintaro Ishihara (who resigned six months later to form a new political party), announced plans to purchase three of the Senkaku Islands that were privately owned and on lease to the central government. He promised to build a harbor and place personnel on the islands, moves he knew would provoke China. Well known for his right-wing views and anti-China rhetoric, Ishihara hoped to shake the Japanese out of what he saw as their dangerous lethargy regarding the threat from China and challenge their lackadaisical attitude about developing the necessary military power to contain it.

Ishihara never got the islands, but the ploy did work to the extent that it triggered a crisis with China, at great cost to Japan's national interests. Well aware of the dangers that Ishihara's purchase would have caused, then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda decided to have the central government buy the islands itself. Since the government already had full control over the islands, ownership represented no substantive change in Tokyo's authority over their use. Purchasing them was the way to sustain the status quo, or so Noda hoped to convince China.

But Beijing responded furiously, denouncing Japan's action as the "nationalization of sacred Chinese land." Across China, citizens called for the boycott of Japanese goods and took to the streets in often-violent demonstrations. Chinese-Japanese relations hit their lowest point since they were normalized 40 years ago. Noda, to his credit, looked for ways to defuse the crisis and restore calm between the two countries, but the Chinese would have none of it. Instead, China has ratcheted up its pressure on Japan, sending patrol ships into the waters around the islands almost every day since the crisis erupted.

The United States needs to do two things with regard to this controversy. First, it must stand firm with its Japanese ally. Any indication

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that Washington might hesitate to support Japan in a conflict would cause enormous consternation in Tokyo. The Japanese right would have a field day, exclaiming that the country's reliance on the United States for its security had left it unable to defend its interests. The Obama administration has wisely reiterated Washington's position that the islands fall within the territory administered by Tokyo and has reassured the Japanese—and warned the Chinese—of its obligation to support Japan under the security treaty.

Second, Washington should use all its persuasive power to impress upon both China and Japan the importance of defusing this issue. Abe could take a helpful first step by giving up the fiction that no dispute over the islands exists. The Senkaku controversy is going to be on the two countries' bilateral agenda whether the Japanese want it there or not. Abe's willingness to discuss it would give China an opening to back down from its confrontational stance and would better align U.S. and Japanese policy.

TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Barack Obama's election in 2008 initially raised concerns in Tokyo. Ever fearful that the United States' interest in their country is waning, the Japanese worried that the new U.S. president's Asia policy would prioritize cooperation with China above all and give short shrift to Japan. Those apprehensions have been alleviated, however, thanks to the recent tensions in U.S.-Chinese relations, repeated visits to Japan by senior U.S. officials, Japanese appreciation for U.S. support following the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami, and Washington's decision to sign the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and to join the East Asia Summit.

The Obama administration's emphasis on the strategic importance of Asia, symbolized by the use of such terms as "pivot," "return," and "rebalancing," has been dismissed by some as mere rhetoric. But it is important rhetoric, which has signaled Washington's commitment not only to continued U.S. military involvement in the region but also to a much broader engagement in the region's affairs. By any measure, the administration has succeeded in communicating to U.S. allies and U.S. adversaries alike that Washington intends to bolster its presence in Asia, not downgrade it.

What worries Tokyo now is not the possibility of U.S.-Chinese collusion; it is the prospect of strategic confrontation. Japan's well-being,

as well as that of many other countries, depends on maintaining both good relations with China, its largest trading partner, and strong security ties with the United States. Given its dependence on Washington for defense and the depth of anti-Japanese sentiment in China, Japan would have little choice but to side with the United States if forced to choose between the two.

But a conflict between China and the United States would not necessarily strengthen U.S.-Japanese relations. In fact, it would increase the influence of advocates of an autonomous Japanese security policy. Arguing that Washington lacked the capabilities and the political will necessary to retain its leading position in East Asia, they would push for Japan to emerge as a heavily armed country able to protect itself in a newly multipolar Asia. To avoid this outcome and to help maintain a stable balance of power, Washington needs to temper its inevitable competition with China by engaging with Beijing to develop institutions and processes that promote cooperation, both bilaterally and among other countries in the region.

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT

In assessing the current Japanese political scene and the possible strategic course that Tokyo might chart, it is important to remember that a right-of-center government and a polarized debate over foreign policy are nothing new in Japan's postwar history. Abe is one of the most ideological of Japan's postwar prime ministers, but so was his grandfather Nobusuke Kishi, who was a cabinet minister during World War II and prime minister from 1957 to 1960. Kishi wanted to revise the U.S.-imposed constitution and to undo other postwar reforms; these are his grandson's goals more than half a century later.

But Kishi was also a pragmatist who distinguished between the desirable and the possible. As prime minister, he focused his energies on the latter, negotiating with the Eisenhower administration a revised security treaty that remains the framework for the U.S.-Japanese alliance today. For Abe as well, ideology will not likely trump pragmatism. The key question to ask about Japan's future is not what kind of world Abe would like to see but what he and other Japanese leaders believe the country must do to survive in the world as they find it.

If Tokyo's foreign policy moves off in a new direction, what will drive it there is not an irrepressible Japanese desire to be a great power. Although some Japanese politicians voice that aspiration, they

will gain the support of the public only if it becomes convinced that changes in the international situation require Japan to take a dramatically different approach from the one that has brought it peace and prosperity for decades.

The Japanese public remains risk averse; nearly 70 years after World War II, it has not forgotten the lessons of that era any more than other Asian nations have. And despite changes in the region, the realities of Japanese politics and of American power still favor a continuation of Japan's current strategy: maintaining the alliance with the United States; gradually expanding Japan's contribution to regional security; developing security dialogues with Australia, India, South Korea, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; and deepening its engagement with China. China's growing economic clout and military power do present new challenges for Tokyo and Washington, but these challenges can be met without dividing Asia into two hostile camps. If Japanese policy changes in anything more than an incremental manner, it will be due to the failure of Washington to evolve a policy that sustains U.S. leadership while accommodating Chinese power.

Will the Abe government chart a new course for Japanese foreign policy? Only if the public comes to believe that the threat from China is so grave and the credibility of the United States' commitment to contain it is so weakened that Japan's survival is at stake. But if rational thinking prevails in Beijing, Tokyo, and Washington, the approach that has made Japan the linchpin of the United States' security strategy in Asia, stabilized the region, and brought Japan peace and prosperity is likely to persist. 🌐