

Japanese Security at the Crossroads: Challenges and Initiatives

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Abstract

In the emerging complex security situation in the Asia-Pacific region, Japanese security policies appear to be undergoing dramatic changes. The alliance with the US, especially the presence of American troops, is facing with some uncertainty after 9/11. The rise of China as a major economic and military power is seen to pose a serious challenge to Japan. Moreover, North Korea's unabated attempts to develop WMD capabilities along with ballistic missiles threaten Japanese security directly. In response, Japan has initiated certain significant steps. It has sent troops to a combat zone, participated in US counter-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan, decided to deploy the ballistic missile defence (BMD) system, and is in the process of revising its Constitution to enable it play a larger security role.



The dramatic changes that have occurred as a result of the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 events more recently have impacted Japan much more than any other country in the Asia-Pacific region. Developments such as the rise of China, continuing domestic economic problems, the growing perception of Japan's marginalisation in the Asia-Pacific economic dynamism, in general, as well as the US war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq, the North Korean pursuit to acquire nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, and the uncertain future of the alliance with the US because of troop restructuring in East Asia, are all forcing Japan to make changes in its foreign and security policies. The recent cabinet-approved New Defence Programme Outline (NDPO) reflect some of these concerns, especially with regard to China's growing might and North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile ambitions.

Historically, the Meiji Restoration in the 1860s and the World War II in the 1940s were significant landmarks that changed the way Japan perceived its security and its place in the world. On both these occasions, the change came about reluctantly under the compulsion of external developments which resulted in Japan taking dramatic and decisive steps. There is some similarity of circumstances this time too,

although the previous two occasions appear to be incomparable to the present one in terms of intensity and urgency. The current developments seem to be forcing Japan to adopt measures unthinkable till recently.

Nearly 14 years of economic stagnation have also taken their toll. A highly globalised nation, Japan is finding out the hard way that recession at home is seriously denting its overall standing and stature in its neighbourhood, and its traditional market strongholds, such as Southeast Asia, are slowly slipping away from its control. For centuries, Japan has lived without the presence of any major power in its vicinity that could threaten its security or undermine its interests. Since the end of World War II, under the protective American security umbrella, Japan did not have to worry about the country's defence. It could channelise all its energy towards becoming an economic superpower and had reconciled itself to being a junior partner to the US so long as its interests were not threatened. China was not perceived to be a threat even after it emerged as a unified communist power, since it remained bogged down with domestic problems and in its rivalry with the US and the former Soviet Union. In any case, China, historically, had been a continental power, with its external reach primarily limited to some parts of Indochina. Thus, until recently, much of the rest of the Asia-Pacific region had come to depend heavily on Japanese investments, technology, and trade. Japan was touted as the head goose that showed the way for other Asian nations. The Cold War left the US with little choice but to maintain a strong military presence in and stand by Japan, however one-sided the security relationship was. Japan successfully used the anti-communist wars that the US waged in Korea and Indochina along with its own massive aid and reparations programmes to not only advance its economic interests but also to consolidate its economic supremacy in the rest of non-communist East Asia. It was a neat and cosy arrangement.

All this is rapidly changing, forcing Japan to re-evaluate things it had earlier taken for granted or had been unwilling to address.¹ Now, as never before, Japan is becoming more realistic and sensitive to its security partnership with the US and that has prompted it to take the historic step of sending troops to Iraq. Its claim for a legitimate place in the world in the form of membership of the UN Security Council has become more ardent. Nor is it hesitant to voice its concerns about China's growing military capabilities. It has set up an external intelligence agency; has joined the American BMD programme; is launching spy satellites under an active space programme; is debating the nuclear option afresh; is willing to amend its Constitution to remove legal hurdles for its military to become a regular force; is reviewing its 'no arms exports' policy, and; is beginning to look beyond the US to secure its interests (as evident in its support to security multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific and for new security partnerships other than with the US - with India, for example).

While it is acknowledged that Japan's security policies are steadily changing, it is debatable whether they are changing too fast or not fast enough, and whether

Japan is taking full advantage of the 9/11 and post-9/11 events to become a 'normal' nation or is simply being forced to take certain measures to save its alliance with the US and not willing to face up to a new reality of defending the country and securing its vital interests all by itself with suitable armaments. Perhaps, it is not really or necessarily, an 'either'/'or'. Instead, indications are that Japan is taking tangible, if incremental, steps so that it is cognisant of the security challenges it is faced with, while remaining relevant to any new security order that may come about at regional as well as global levels. Undoubtedly, there is a growing desire to change its Constitution, which was thrust upon it by the occupying US forces nearly five decades ago, increase its contribution to global security and play a role commensurate with its economic might, while not breaking free from its alliance partnership with the US. Any signs of the alliance arrangement weakening will force Japan to take certain measures that it may not be willing to take at this juncture.

It is these dynamics that the paper seeks to discuss. It is by no means possible to cover the entire spectrum of Japanese security concerns and policies, hence what is attempted here is to provide a brief background in order to understand how Japan has tried to come to grips with its security ever since the Cold War ended, deliberate on some important security challenges that it faces, and discuss the new initiatives it is taking to address these concerns.

From a theoretical standpoint, the dilemmas mentioned earlier coupled with a lack of strategic clarity to address them are reflected in the way Japan has been responding to events. One can discern signs of oscillation between realism and liberal institutionalism and at times attempts to pursue the two simultaneously.² As a staunch ally of the US, Japan has been a firm part of the balance of power strategy that Washington has pursued, a strong sign of a realist approach. Simultaneously, Japan has also shown considerable flexibility and an inclination toward multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific. In fact, Japan was one of the very few countries that openly supported the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. Since then, Japan has consistently supported the creation of multilateral institutions both for security and economic cooperation, especially in the post-Cold War period. Both the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), that came into being in the 1990s are said to be the result of Japanese initiative.³ At the same time, Japan has also exhibited a firm commitment to realism by strengthening the bilateral alliance with the US through the Revised Defence Guidelines of 1997-98 and is desperately trying to ensure that it is not weakened.⁴ Perhaps this dual tendency has prompted Michael Green to brand Japan as a reluctant realist.⁵ He argues that Japan has begun to move away from the post-World War II legacy towards a relatively more independent policy. Its responses have become far less reactive; it understands the limitations of national power resources, it aspires to build a global identity and it has come to grips with fundamental changes in the international environment. At the same time, however, it is reluctant to move away from the basic framework of the alliance system.

Backdrop

In the last several centuries, Japan existed without having to worry about an external security threat. An archipelagic country located away from other major power centres, a lack of appeal for European metropolitan powers, who were prowling the world for raw materials and a relatively small and under-developed market, ensured that Japan was not colonised. Also, 200 years of a policy of ‘seclusion’ during the Tokugawa period sanitised the country from Western influence. It was only after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 that Japan embarked on an unprecedented transformation. It tried to emulate almost every aspect of the West, from food and clothing to ambitions of acquiring colonies to advance its economic interests. This resulted in a militarised Japan, aggressive towards its neighbours, and its participation in World War II. Japan’s foreign policy, from the time of defeat and occupation after World War II by US forces, till 1952 showed remarkable progress, though it primarily concerned itself with post-War reconstruction, protection and advancement of its economic interests, and firmly entrenched itself in the US-led containment strategy through a mutual security treaty as part of the San Francisco alliance system, that came to be known as the Yoshida Doctrine.⁶ Its Constitution, dictated by the US, especially the famous Article 9, along with the Yoshida Doctrine became the basis for the initial formulation of the country’s security policy.

After signing the San Francisco Peace Treaty (which the Soviets boycotted), Japan also signed a bilateral security treaty with the US, under which the Americans would continue to station a large number of troops in defence of Japan. The Korean War, the intensification of the Cold War, the emergence of communist China, and strong communist winds blowing across Southeast Asia compelled the Americans to rethink their vow never to allow Japan to emerge as a powerful nation, for it was crucial to secure Japan’s support and cooperation for their anti-communist crusades in Asia. That way, Japan played a crucial role in crafting the strategy of forward deployment and bilateral alliances for the US, which continue to be the mainstay for US policy even after more than five decades. Thus, the National Reserve Force that was created in 1950 consisting of 75,000 personnel was renamed as the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) in 1954 under American prodding.

Basic Defence Policy

On May 20, 1957, the Cabinet approved the ‘Basic Policy on National Defence’ in which the “objective of national defence is to prevent direct and indirect aggression, but once invaded, to repel such aggression, thereby preserving the independence and peace of Japan founded upon democratic principles.”⁷ In order to achieve this goal, the following principles were enunciated as guiding principles:

- To support the activities of the United Nations and promote international cooperation, thereby contributing to the realisation of world peace.
- To promote public welfare and enhance the people’s love for the country, thereby establishing the sound basis essential to Japan’s security.

- To develop incrementally the effective defence capabilities necessary for self-defence, with regard to the nation's resources and the prevailing domestic situation.
- To deal with external aggression on the basis of the Japan-US security arrangement, pending the effective functioning of the United Nations in the future in deterring and repelling such aggression.⁸

These principles would be guided by four basic policies. One, the military cannot be called to duty until armed attack is initiated and that the scope and level of use of defence forces are kept to the minimum for the purpose of self-defence. Two, Japan will not possess military capabilities strong enough to pose a military threat to other countries, beyond the minimum level for self-defence. Three, Japan would adhere to the three non-nuclear principles - of not possessing nuclear weapons, not producing them, and not permitting their introduction in Japan. Finally, there would be complete civilian control over the armed forces.⁹ While the SDF forms one pillar, the Japan-US security arrangement forms the second pillar of the defence policy. Thus, the basic policy, while allowing a gradual defence build-up to tackle limited attacks on Japan, rests on American assistance to repel a large-scale aggression on Japan.

A series of defence plans covering a period of three to five years were formulated by the government which acted as guides to the build-up of defence capabilities by the SDF, beginning from 1958 till 1976, based on the Yoshida doctrine of moderate and gradual acquisition of military capabilities. In a major departure from the earlier policy, the NDPO was adopted in 1976, which stipulated the level of defence capability to be maintained by Japan in peacetime. A significant new concept, called the 'standard defence forces' was introduced to underscore the qualitative aspects of defence modernisation. A series of developments from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s – Soviet military build-up in the Pacific and its gaining a foothold in the form of military bases in Vietnam (the first ever overseas bases); Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia in 1979; and the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan a year later – had a considerable impact on Japanese thinking. The accession of Nakasone Yasuhiro as the Prime Minister in 1982 resulted in fundamental directional changes in Japanese defence planning. He not only broke the taboo of 1 per cent of GDP ceiling for defence spending but was also instrumental in attempting to redefine Japan's security relations with the US. First, he broadened the concept of self-defence by stating that in case of an attack on American forces in its vicinity, Japan had the right to go to the assistance of the US. Second, the Japanese government agreed in January 1983 to make an exception for the US to provide certain dual-use technologies by removing earlier restrictions.¹⁰ Finally, Nakasone also became famous for the statement that "Japan should become like an unsinkable aircraft carrier"¹¹ for the US, further entrenching its links with Washington.

Notwithstanding Nakasone's efforts to free Japan from the burden of the past, Japan was hesitant to take the extra steps towards becoming a 'normal' nation, and

the issue of 'collective defence' remained highly sensitive and controversial despite repeated flexible interpretations of the Constitution. It was during the 1991 Gulf War that Japan came under heavy criticism by the West for its inability to participate in the coalition force to dislodge the Iraqis from Kuwait, although Japan, probably more than anyone, was critically dependent on West Asian oil. Tokyo doled out US\$13 billion as its contribution to the war but chequebook diplomacy was obviously not enough. The Gulf War compelled Japan, first, to rethink its role in world affairs, and secondly, to give a greater technology thrust to its weapon acquisitions. The first concrete manifestation of Japanese endeavour towards becoming a normal state came in the form of the peacekeeping operations bill (officially called Law Concerning Cooperation for the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Other Operations) that was enacted in June 1992, which led to the despatch of Japanese troops overseas to Cambodia in September of the same year under the UN auspices – the first time since World War II.

Twenty years after the first NDPO was unveiled, the Japanese cabinet approved a new Outline in 1996, taking cognisance of changed circumstances and domestic constraints. On the one hand, the economy went into deep recession and the government, saddled with huge deficits, was forced to cut spending on defence, and, on the other, a rapidly ageing population further restricted the availability of younger people who could be inducted into the armed forces. Although an Advisory Group on Defence Issues, set up in 1994 as a prelude to the Defence Outline, had recommended certain vital changes,¹² policymakers preferred to broadly continue with the previous policy, albeit minor changes.

Japan possesses one of the most modern militaries in the world today, since it had to start building its armed forces afresh from the mid-1950s. As the Japanese economy expanded phenomenally, its ability to spend on defence also went up considerably. The technological base that it created and the limitations of manpower availability have further helped Japan to keep its armed forces technologically advanced. Notwithstanding the self-imposed 1 per cent GDP limit, Japan is the fourth largest spender on defence.

Security Challenges

Like most other nations in the Asia-Pacific, Japan is also embroiled in a number of territorial disputes with its neighbours. Prominently on the Northern Territories (Kuriles) with Russia, over the Senkakus with China, and on a small group of Takeshima Islands with South Korea. Given its critical dependence on external trade, the security of the sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia are also of major concern. Thus, Japan's security interests and concerns are wide-ranging.

In the post-Cold War period, one can discern two distinct phases in Japanese security thinking. In the immediate aftermath, it was anticipated that an era of peace and tranquillity would follow with economic linkages playing an important role as

opposed to political and strategic issues during the Cold War. Japan was the first major proponent of the creation of multilateral mechanisms, both economic and security, with a view that multilateralism would take care of many of the regional problems in Asia, whereas the US alliance system would ensure no drastic shift in regional equilibrium. However, it did not really turn out that way especially with regard to the rise of China and North Korea's relentless pursuit of WMD capability. The North Korean problem began in 1993-94 and during this phase Japan had to confront a series of challenges. One can clearly see a growing disenchantment with multilateralism, in general, during this time.

Alliance with US

Once it became obvious that the end of the Cold War did not exactly usher in an era of peace and tranquillity in the Asia Pacific region, Japan, visibly unnerved in particular by the Sino-US bonhomie under President Clinton (with talk of a strategic partnership between the two), tried to strengthen its security relationship with the US. The fear of 'Japan bashing' replacing 'Japan passing' by the US, in a way, was a signal to Tokyo that the alliance's importance was on the decline. The second aspect of major concern was the North Korean nuclear crisis during 1993-94. Alarmed by these developments, Tokyo was quick to take steps to restore the balance in American approach as well as underscore the centrality of the bilateral security alliance. The upshot was the signing of the Revised Defence Guidelines in 1997, which were approved through a number of laws passed by the Diet.

For the first time, the new guidelines committed Japan to make changes in its security posture and hence, marked a significant departure from the past. First, there was considerable rethinking on the question of Japanese participation in 'collective defence'. Second, the guidelines paved the way for the SDF to operate beyond the borders of Japan in "situations in areas surrounding Japan."¹³ In other words, the scope of bilateral cooperation was expanded considerably with Japan providing a vital rear-area support to the US. These changes were interpreted to be within stipulated limits of constitutional restrictions and not a deviation from the basic policy of defensive defence and non-nuclear commitment. Still, for Japan the expanded role fell within the ambit of a low-cost, low-risk option; that is, the US would come to Japan's rescue if the latter came under an attack, but not vice-versa.

The events of 9/11 and the resurgence of the nuclear crisis in North Korea in 2003 once again, became a testing time for Japanese security planners. So far, it had been virtually taken for granted that the American forward deployments would remain, despite some occasional hiccups in bilateral relations. However, with the American war on terrorism and its deep involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration has been advocating a realignment of force deployments in East Asia. There has been a plethora of reports suggesting that large concentration of troops in South Korea and Japan may be of little use because much of the action that America is involved in, and likely to get involved in the coming years, is most

unlikely to be either Japan or South Korea, notwithstanding the North Korean nuclear standoff. *The Los Angeles Times*, quoting Douglas J. Feith, US Undersecretary of Defence for Policy, and other unnamed senior Pentagon officials, claimed that, "Everything is going to move everywhere. There is not going to a place in the world where it is going to be the same as it used to be. We are going to rationalise our posture everywhere - in Korea, in Japan, everywhere."¹⁴ Subsequently, the US has moved its troops away from the demilitarised zone in South Korea and has initially shifted some 12 per cent of troops to Iraq. No one is sure if those troops will ever be called back.

It is obvious that the earlier rationale for stationing troops in Japan – to defend it from external aggression – is not credible anymore. The US seems to be contemplating the creation of a small, agile force stationed in several countries across Asia for quicker reactions than maintaining large concentration of troops at one or two places. The US is unlikely to close down its bases and take its troops home, but a similar process might be set in motion. A large number of troops in Japan (and South Korea) are likely to be replaced by the deployment of a small force equipped with technologically advanced weapons systems. Japan would also be expected to share a greater burden of regional security.

China

As noted, the emergence of China as a major economic and military power poses a serious challenge to Japan. One can see a marked shift in perceptions about China since the early 1990s. Japan thought it would bridge the gap between Beijing and Washington after the 1989 Tiananmen incident by befriending China at a time when it was being shunned by the West. Public perception started changing especially with the resumption of nuclear testing by China in 1995, its incessant attempts to rake up the historical role of Japan, and Chinese intimidation of Taiwan with ballistic missiles - close to Japanese communication lines near Okinawa. It soon became apparent that China was beginning to hurt Japanese economic and strategic interests. A well known Japanese economist argues that both in terms of share of world GDP and global trade, the trend is unmistakably clear: it has been consistently rising in the case of China while declining for Japan. Even on the question of dependence on markets for exports for the Asia-Pacific countries, the roles for Japan and China have been reversed. "The degree of dependence on China as an export market jumped to more than 12 per cent in 2001 from slightly more than 6 per cent in 1990. On the other hand, the dependence on Japan as an export market dropped to around 11 per cent in recent years from above 14 per cent in 1990. China has become more important export market for East Asia than Japan."¹⁵ This trend is much more marked in the case of the ASEAN countries, which are becoming critically dependent on Chinese markets than the other way around.

Similarly, on the diplomatic front too, China has stolen a march over Japan.¹⁶ It was China that proposed and signed the free trade agreement with ASEAN, was the

first to accede to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and signed a joint declaration with ASEAN on 'Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity' in October 2003.¹⁷ The declining role and influence of Japan in South-East Asia prompted Prime Minister Koizumi to convene a Japan-ASEAN summit meeting in December 2003 and offer to sign almost all the treaties that China had already signed with ASEAN.¹⁸ China's role in the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear impasse has acquired even greater strategic significance. Though the development of nuclear capability and an array of ballistic missiles, by Pyongyang, impinges on Japanese security directly, Tokyo has had very little say so far, or as *Asahi Shimbun's* editorial aptly dubbed Japan as being "out of the loop."¹⁹ So far, two rounds of Beijing-sponsored six-party talks in December 2003 and February 2004 have not yielded any concrete results, but China has undoubtedly got much of the diplomatic credit and leverage. The point is, whichever way one looks at it, China's economic, diplomatic and strategic stature is growing rapidly and that is not only undermining Japan's status but also its role in the Asia-Pacific.

There is a realisation that China has emerged as a major competitor for Japan in the Asia-Pacific for political influence, raw materials²⁰, and markets. China's rise is occurring at a time when Japan is being perceived to be on the decline. Therefore, Japan has to deal with the prospect of China's emergence as the most influential power in any future regional order. Recent events, for example, the incursion of a Chinese nuclear submarine into the territorial waters of Japan in November 2004 has contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations.

North Korea

The 1993 crisis, when it became known that North Korea was pursuing a clandestine nuclear weapon programme, was the first shock that Japan had to cope with. However, it was diffused through an Agreed Framework agreement in 1994, under which a Korean Energy Development Organisation (KEDO) was set up to oversee the construction of two 1000 MW light water reactors and supply half-a-million tonnes of heavy oil for heating and electricity production, in return for North Korean compliance with NPT provisions, and the ensured closing down of graphic-moderated reactors and related facilities.²¹ The project was scheduled for completion by 2003, with a budget of over US\$5 billion - to be financed mainly by South Korea, Japan and the US, but this target could not be achieved.

The current crisis was set off with the North Korean admission, to US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly during his visit in October 2002, that it was secretly pursuing a uranium enrichment programme. The suspension of KEDO activities was soon followed by North Korean withdrawal from the NPT in January 2003. It is not just North Korea's secret programme, but also insidious revelations that North Korea and Pakistan had been swapping missiles for nuclear technology, that unnerved Japan, and the world. Moreover, Japan already had to contend with North Korean ballistic missiles that have the range to cover its entire territory. When seen against

the backdrop of the above developments, Japan might rethink the nuclear option as well as the acquisition of power projection/offensive capability.

New Initiatives

Compelled by the fast changing security environment, Japan has embarked on a series of measures to deal with these challenges. Some of the important ones are discussed below.

BMD

After dithering for several years, Japan took a very significant step in May 2003 to deploy US-made missile defence systems by 2006. Reportedly, the Defence Agency would seek 134.1 billion yen in its fiscal 2004 budget request for the initial phase of spending.²² This acquires significance because Japan had had serious reservations about the BMD/TMD (Theatre Missile Defence) even though it had been participating in research with the US to 'understand' the system.

Japan first participated in a four-year study called Western Pacific Basin Architecture study (WestPac) in 1990 and undertook a number of related research projects.²³ Subsequently, Japan and the US were also engaged in a Bilateral Study on TMD in 1994 prompted in part by North Korean testing of the No Dong I theatre-range missile. Japan was not initially impressed by a number of options that the US provided to induce it to participate in the programme, but there was a dramatic shift in public opinion, both because of a week-long sabre rattling of Chinese missiles across the Taiwan Strait in March 1996, and the North Korean launch of the Taepo Dong-1 medium-range missile in August 1998 that flew over Japan. Still, Japan was only willing to participate in research, but not a full-fledged involvement or deployment. The Bush administration's removal of the earlier distinction between national missile defence (NMD) and theatre missile defence (TMD), and decision to proceed with a unified BMD programme, further deterred Japan.

Japan's main concerns were: first, there were grave doubts, as in the case of the 1980s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), about the technological feasibility of successfully building a foolproof anti-missile system. Second, the costs associated with the BMD were expected to run into several hundreds of billions of dollars. Given the economic slump that Japan had been going through, the BMD projects was a major disincentive. Moreover, once developed, Japan might be forced to procure the costly systems, probably at the cost of other hardware acquisitions for its military.²⁴ Despite these reservations, Japan decided to take the plunge. This has significance both for Japanese security perspectives and also for the rest of the region.

Dispatch of Troops Abroad

The second important initiative was to send SDF troops abroad. About two years before Japan first sent troops to Iraq, Maritime-SDF warships had started operating

in the Indian Ocean (since November 2001) in what was called rear-area support to the US war in Afghanistan to provide at-sea refuelling to the US and British naval vessels under the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law that was passed in late October 2001. An Air Self-Defence Force C-130 cargo plane was also deployed to transport supplies for the US forces. By November 2002, the SDF had completed 140 refuelling operations, approximately 62 million gallons of fuel, all paid for by the Government of Japan. The deployment consisted of three destroyers (including one Aegis-equipped destroyer), two supply ships, and some 1,200 military personnel.²⁵

The dispatch of troops to Iraq, however, is the most momentous decision, for this is the first time since the end of World War II that Japanese troops were sent abroad to a combat zone in an operation that was led by the US and in the absence of a UN sanction. Since this was an unprecedented situation, the Japanese parliament passed three War Contingency Bills in June 2003, again a first, that gave significant powers to the government in military emergencies. It is obvious that the political environment has changed considerably since the 1991 Gulf War, a time when Japan could get away with its US \$13 billion monetary contribution to the war.

The thousand-plus troops that Japan has sent to Iraq, mainly for humanitarian purposes, are not going to make any difference to the realities on the ground, except that the deployment is highly symbolic. Having broken the psychological barrier, this should pave the way, as claimed by Defence Agency chief Shigeru Ishida, for future participation of Japanese troops abroad.²⁶ The fact that, as reflected in the opinion polls, a majority of the Japanese opposed sending troops to Iraq without UN sanction was not a deterrent for the political leadership. Equally important was a statement that Koizumi made in the Diet that, "There are times when we make mistakes following the public opinion."²⁷ It implies that the political leadership is becoming much more realistic. In saying that, Koizumi's primary concern was indisputably Japan's relations with the US.

Constitution

Perhaps no other issue is as sensitive as the Constitution, in particular Article 9. No government has ever contemplated making amendments to it so far. But that may change soon.

The extreme position of Article 9 started becoming problematic once the Cold War intensified and the US wanted Japan to suitably rearm itself in its fight against communist threats. It soon became clear that it would be untenable and unrealistic to defend the country without an armed force. The 'great debate', that took place in the early 1950s, marked the beginning of the flexible interpretation of the Constitution. The SDF-ground, air and maritime-was created in 1954, arguing that Japan as an independent nation possessed the right to defend itself, a right that is sanctioned by the UN.

Notwithstanding the steady arming of the SDF with highly sophisticated and

modern weapons systems, it has been primarily defensive in nature scrupulously avoiding any offensive capability. Despite enormous pressure during the Cold War, Japan steadfastly resisted attempts to make changes to or stretch the interpretation of Article 9, to the extent of acquiring explicitly offensive weaponry. It persisted with the basic principles that were laid down: no power projection capabilities, no arms exports, and no nuclear weapons.

Surprisingly, in the last two to three years, especially after 9/11, the voices that are urging amendment of the Constitution are becoming louder, so that some of the techno-legal problems that the government is facing, for instance, in participation in collective defence activities, can now be addressed. Contrary to earlier times, when only the right-wingers were vocal, the opposition to revision is less muted, and support is growing steadily across all sections of society. According to an opinion poll by *Asahi Shimbun* in early May 2004, a majority of the respondents favoured a revision to the Constitution.²⁸ In yet another opinion poll by the daily *Mainichi Shimbun*, about 78 per cent of the parliamentarians favoured rewriting the Constitution, though many strongly felt that the war-renouncing clause should not be completely replaced.²⁹ Even Nippon Keidanren (Japanese chamber of commerce and industry), the country's most powerful corporate sector lobby, has come out in support of statutory revisions.³⁰ Despite the differences between two leading members of the coalition, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the New Komeito, the proposed working-level team between the two parties, on the outline of the national plebiscite bill on the Constitutional amendment could have happened in April 2004. In any case, it is widely believed that when the final report of the parliament is ready next year, some concrete movements are likely to take place. No doubt, these views reflect the generational change that has taken place in Japan, with those born after World War II looking at Japan's future differently³¹, among traces of growing nationalism.³² The ruling LDP seems determined to bring about the revisions in 2005, on the eve of its 50th year of founding. The nature of these changes will emerge only after it comes up for discussion in parliament and will be based on public reactions.

Nuclear Issue

Another thorny issue that has surfaced in recent times is the question of nuclear weapons for Japan. As the only country that was subjected to nuclear attacks in 1945, anything 'nuclear' is a highly emotive issue in Japan. Public opinion continues to be vehemently averse to the very idea of Japan acquiring nuclear weapons. However, the debate is an ongoing one. It has become particularly intense in the recent past, especially among bureaucratic and academic circles because of the North Korean programme. Despite repeated assertions of its commitment to the NPT and non-proliferation, Japanese actions have often tended to be ambiguous. For instance, the then Prime Minister Eisaku Sato declared, in 1967, the famous 'Three Non-Nuclear Principles' for Japan pledging not to possess, produce, or permit the introduction of

nuclear weapons into Japan. He soon tempered this ban by remaining ambiguous - first, about American nuclear assets on Japanese soil or in Japanese waters, and second, not to preclude future circumstances that might warrant acquiring this capability.³³ The Japanese dilemma was also evident during the NPT ratification process, a treaty it ratified in 1976 after a prolonged debate, and later during the NPT's indefinite extension in the mid-1990s.

Although there is no evidence to suggest that Japan has indulged in acquiring nuclear capability in any manner, it has compromised its no-nuclear principles during the Cold War. Moreover, the technological capability it has acquired through an active civilian nuclear programme has led some analysts to dub Japan as a 'para-nuclear' or a 'virtual nuclear' power. After the 1973 oil shocks, Japan has been pursuing one of the largest and ambitious atomic energy programmes in the world. In the process, it is also accumulating large quantities of reactor-grade plutonium. Most believe that Japan possesses the wherewithal - raw materials, technology, and capital - for developing nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

Japan appears to be effecting fundamental changes to its foreign and security policies in response to recent developments, though it is yet to come out of the 'reactive' mould. To a large extent, these changes are centred around two issues: one, the uncertain future of the bilateral security relationship with the US, and two, the shifting nature of the regional security order in the Asia-Pacific. There are clear indications that the US is realising the futility of maintaining a large concentration of troops in Japan, as the military challenges it has to confront lie elsewhere. Substantial US troop withdrawal from Japan will not only render the security treaty less relevant, but will also diminish the incentive to maintain a robust extended deterrence. That means Japan either has to contribute substantially so that it remains relevant to US security interests, or become strategically autonomous by making suitable changes, for which it does not yet appear ready. The rear-area support to the US in Afghanistan, and the momentous decision to send troops to Iraq are primarily aimed at preserving the bilateral alliance.

If the North Korean WMD programme poses an immediate danger, the rise of China is perceived to be a long-term challenge. Prolonged economic stagnation at home and rapid expansion of the Chinese economy are undermining Japan's role and importance in the Asia-Pacific. There is a growing feeling that Japan is getting marginalised in regional affairs.

It is significant that, despite serious reservations, Japan has decided to participate in the US-led BMD programme and deploy the system by 2006. If current moves are any indication, in all likelihood, the Constitution will be amended very soon - clearing the way for Japan to make the SDF into a regular military force, so that it can defend the country without external help, and take part in collective defence activities. Similarly, the debate over the nuclear issue has also intensified. If North

Korea's nuclear question remains in a limbo and if doubts arise about the credibility of the American nuclear umbrella, Japan is most likely to re-examine its non-nuclear policy.

In its quest for autonomy, Japan wants any change to be a gradual process. Importantly, on all these issues, public opinion is becoming favourable. In the end, the quest for autonomy can only succeed if Japan is willing to come out of the shadows of the "Black Ships."³⁴

References/End Notes

1. For example, most of the neighbours that came under Japanese occupation continue to harbour the feeling that Japan has not fully come to terms to its historical role and hence suspicions and bitterness persist even today.
2. Jennifer M. Lind extensively discusses broad theoretical strands on Japan's security in "Pacifism or Passing the Buck? Testing Theories of Japanese Security Policy", *International Security*, 29 (1), Summer 2004, pp. 92-121.
3. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's idea to create an East Asian Economic Caucus (which the US vehemently opposed because it was not included) took a different avatar in the form of ASEAN Plus Three (and ASEAN Plus India) in the mid-1990s, and was enthusiastically welcomed by Tokyo. Contrary to the general perception, the idea of ASEAN Plus Three was mooted much before the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis with Japan playing a major role; it was more to do with the creation of the free trade zones in North America and in the European Union region.
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the West. This marked the end of the 'isolation policy' and the beginning of a new era in Japan's modern history.

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