

JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

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Despite Political Uncertainty, Japan Can Still Show the Flag

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Gloom and doom are spreading in Washington about the reliability of Japan as an alliance partner and global security player. Last month, think tanks around town had seminars asking “Can the United States Depend on Japan” and “Japan: Sick Man of Asia?” Echoing this growing sentiment, two prominent Japan experts argued in the *New York Times* on May 14 that U.S. policymakers “may need to scale down their ambitions for the role they wish to assign Japan.”¹

The political headlines out of Tokyo are fueling this new pessimism. Japan is on its third prime minister in as many years. The ruling coalition led by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) may survive elections expected this August but not with the two-thirds majority it now relies on in the Lower House to override stonewalling by the Opposition-controlled Upper House. If the Democratic Party of Japan wins, its new leader Yukio Hatoyama will have difficulty backing away from his party’s reckless campaign pledges to slash host nation support for U.S. bases, revise the Status of Forces Agreement, and stop the realignment of U.S. Marines on Okinawa. Hatoyama is a pragmatist, but he will have to manage the left wing of his party and his Social Democrat allies in the Upper House. And no matter what the result this coming August, every analyst in Tokyo expects a double election of both houses of the Diet in the summer of 2010 that could completely reshuffle the deck again anyway.

For those in Washington who benefited from the predictability of the Koizumi years, it is hard not to feel some sympathy for alliance managers facing the current circumstances. On the other hand, the pessimism about Japan’s strategic reliability and importance is vastly overstated. The current political impasse in Tokyo represents the final death throes of the old “1955 system” and not a new retrenchment or retreat in Japan’s strategic trajectory. The Social Democrats and the left have collapsed in Japan, and it is an accident of incomplete political realignment that they have any casting vote at all. If anything, the center of gravity in Japanese politics and strategic thought has continued solidifying in the face of growing Chinese and North Korean challenges.

If one looks beyond the political headlines and examines the politics of Japanese security policy more closely, it is striking how many new precedents are being set. Over the past month, the Self Defense Forces (SDF) have demonstrated capabilities and doctrine on missile defense and antipiracy that would have been unthinkable even a few years ago. Meanwhile, officials and scholars are laying the conceptual groundwork and building a strong consensus for new National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) that will position the SDF to increase capabilities even further in the years ahead. And new polls show that public opinion is behind both developments.

New JSDF Operational Precedents

The clearest evidence of Japan’s continued strengthening of security practices is in the Self Defense Forces’ latest—and first—joint operations. On March 27, the government of Japan mobilized its missile defense system for the first time in anticipation of the launch of a ballistic missile by North Korea. Under an order issued by Defense Minister Hamada, the SDF stood up its first joint operational command, and a Japan Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) general was given authority to destroy any ballistic missile believed to be headed toward Japanese territory without seeking cabinet approval. Three Aegis-equipped Maritime Self Defense Force

¹ Jim Foster and Robert M. Orr, “An Alliance in Need of an Update,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/15/opinion/15iht-edorr.html>.

(MSDF) destroyers, two carrying Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) interceptors, were dispatched to monitor the launch. In addition, land-based PAC-3 (Patriot Advanced Capability) batteries were deployed throughout central and northern Japan. This also presented an opportunity to advance cooperation and interoperability with U.S. forces, which had also dispatched two destroyers to monitor the launch.

The SDF was then authorized to stand up its first joint operational command overseas, in support of antipiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden. The mission will be based at the main airbase in Djibouti, probably under the command of an MSDF two star, with components from all three services. Two MSDF destroyers, each equipped with SH-60K patrol helicopters and speedboats, were sent to the region in mid-March on the first MSDF mission of its kind, carrying a total of 400 MSDF personnel and some coast guard officials. On April 17, the government also ordered preparations for the dispatch of two P-3C patrol aircraft, whose crew and support staff of approximately 150, including 50 Ground Self Defense Force (GSDF) personnel to protect the aircraft on the ground, will be stationed at the main airbase in Djibouti. The government has signaled its intention to support future missions by introducing an antipiracy bill in the Diet, which would enable the MSDF to protect vessels of other nations in addition to those affiliated with Japan (registration, personnel, or cargo). The law would also relax restrictions on the use of force by authorizing MSDF personnel to fire on suspicious vessels. These activities in the Gulf of Aden build on Japan's refueling operations in support of coalition operations in Afghanistan, another significant component of Japan's global security profile. (Legislation for those operations is set to expire at the end of this year.)

Proposals on Japanese Defense Strategy

Officials and nonofficials in Tokyo have also produced a series of thoughtful strategic documents in anticipation of Japan's next National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) due at the end of this year. Two separate reports released last fall by the Tokyo Foundation and Matsushita Institute for Government and Management are particularly revealing.² Both contain a series of recommendations designed to enhance Japan's regional and global leadership role in both military and nonmilitary areas, including the provision of public goods. On security issues, both support revising the government interpretation of the constitution to exercise the right of collective self-defense; establishing a permanent law for the dispatch of SDF forces; and fostering trilateral relationships with like-minded states. The Tokyo Foundation report also proposes sanctioning strikes on suspected missile launch pads to supplement ballistic missile defense capabilities; increasing antisubmarine and surveillance capabilities (such as unmanned aerial vehicles); and creating a National Security Council in the Cabinet Office to organize security policy. These studies by no means represent the entire spectrum of the defense policy debate but appear to signify an emerging consensus (rare in the current political environment) on issues that will in large part determine the extent to which Japan augments its diplomatic and strategic weight. A defense policy committee established by the prime minister in January is also expected to weigh in on these questions in the coming months.³

Public Opinion

The SDF has clearly entered the public consciousness in terms of providing public goods. A Cabinet Office poll on the SDF and defense issues published March 16 revealed that 63.2 percent of the public either somewhat or fully supports SDF dispatches overseas. When asked about the purpose of the SDF, 78.4 percent of respondents mentioned disaster relief operations, 70 percent noted the defense of the nation, and 43.6 percent referenced international peace and cooperation activities. As for what the SDF should focus on in the future, 73.8 percent said disaster relief, 60.1 percent defense of the nation, and 44.3 percent international peace and cooperation activities.

² Policy Research Division, Tokyo Foundation, *New Security Strategy of Japan: Multilayered and Cooperative Security Strategy* (Tokyo: Tokyo Foundation, October 8, 2008),

http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/additional_info/New%20Security%20Strategy%20of%20Japan.pdf; and "A Critical Moment for the Japan-U.S. Alliance: The Urgent Need for Progress toward a 'Broad and Balanced Alliance,'" Matsushita Institute for Government and Management Research Center, November 24, 2008, www.mskj.or.jp.

³ "Anzenhoshou to Boueiryoku ni kan suru Kondankai" [Roundtable on security and defense force], <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/ampoboue/2/konkyo.pdf>.

A simple majority of the Japanese public also appears to support constitutional revision. According to a *Yomiuri* poll released April 3, 51.6 percent are in favor, a nine-point increase from 2008, with 36.1 percent against (down seven points from last year). Support also appears to be bipartisan: 54 percent of those who aligned themselves with the LDP and 53 percent of DPJ loyalists were in favor, up 7 and 12 points, respectively, from last year. When those in favor were asked to explain their stance, 49 percent of respondents cited Japan's inability to make international contributions and respond to new challenges under the current constitution, while 38 percent said the government has reached the limit of constitutional interpretation and manipulation. These numbers should add impetus to the security debate even if revision remains a long-term prospect.

Showing the Flag

The dual crises of political paralysis and economic stagnation could easily be perceived as a recipe for endless strategic drift in Japan. Moreover, the political elite in Japan has avoided hard choices on strategically important issues ranging from immigration reform to women's empowerment and diplomacy toward North Korea. However, the activities of the SDF, the fresh strategic thinking going into the NDPG, and increased public consciousness of security policy all suggest that it would be an enormous mistake to confuse the process of political realignment in the Diet for broader Japanese strategic retrenchment.

There will undoubtedly be more chest thumping from the DPJ about establishing a more "balanced" and "less dependent" relationship with the United States, but political realities at home and geostrategic realities in Northeast Asia will drive future Japanese governments squarely back to the alliance. If a "more balanced" alliance means greater Japanese diplomatic activism in Asia or in international institutions, then all the better for both Japan and the United States.

The next year or so will be challenging for alliance managers, but if Washington assumes that Japan is going backward, U.S. policy will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the United States and Japan prepare for the 50th anniversary of the Security Treaty next year, both sides have every reason to be ambitious about the future of the alliance.

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