



Institute for Islamic Strategic
Affairs

Japan's rise: the changing security balance in the Asia-Pacific and beyond

Resurgence of Russia and China Program

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Abstract

For over two decades Japan has been slowly 'normalising' its military to a level which matches its economic strength. Yet in the past few years this process has accelerated because of the new security challenges it faces. Chief among these is the rise of China. This is causing normative changing in both China and Japan and is begging to ingrain a constructed identity of an enemy. One of the most important changes has been Japan's recent reinterpretation of its pacifist constitution to allow for collective self-defence. We see that the majority of Asia has welcomed Japan's military normalisation as it can help to balance China's regional power.

Is Japan a great power? This is a topic which few in Japan wish to discuss openly because of the historic baggage that it carries. When Japan's Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera recently said in a speech to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C., that Japan was a great power, his aides underplayed the phrase's significance and claimed it was a poor translation.¹ Yet this is a conversation that is likely occurring in private as Japan's leaders and its population are adjusting to a region in a state of flux and are looking at the best way to

address it. Japan has long been a latent great power but developments in the last two decades, especially the rise of China have set in motion Japan moving from a latent great power to a more obvious and assertive one, even if they are loath to admit it.

In the late 1980s Japan was the world's rising nation with the second largest economy, which some were predicting would soon overtake the USA. The early 90s saw an economic collapse which resulted in over two decades of low or negative growth. During this time China enacted economic reforms and began to develop rapidly. China's growing presence and assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region, especially since 2012 has stimulated a significant shift in the regional power balance. The most important regional reaction has been that of Japan, which through significant political and strategic shifts is becoming a major balancing force to China.

China's assertiveness has prompted Japan to speed up military normalisation

The recent Japanese Defence White Paper for 2014 highlights what they perceive to be the biggest growing threats to Japan, which mainly centre on China because of both its assertive regional actions and its rapid military modernisation.² These include unease over China's imposition of the air-defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, the disputed sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and increasing numbers of foreign aircraft incursions into Japanese airspace.

The disputed sovereignty of Islands in the East China Sea has become an important issue in the past few years with the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands being some of the most hotly

contested. The issue came to the fore in 2012 when Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara planned to use public money to buy the islands from their private Japanese owner. The Japanese government bought three of the islands from their private owner in a move to block Mr Ishihara's plan. This angered China, triggering public and diplomatic protests. Activists and protesters from each State have attempted to sail to the islands to make political statements. Since then, Chinese government ships have regularly sailed in and out of the territorial waters around the islands that Japan claims. In November 2013 China also established an ADIZ in the East China Sea which covers the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and requires all aircraft to identify themselves

for security reasons. The USA and Japan ignore the ADIZ restrictions.

Japan has also faced incursions into its own airspace by Chinese and Russian military planes with increasing frequency. Between 2013 and 2014 Japan scrambled fighter jets 810 times to escort foreign military aircraft in their airspace, including 415 times responding to Chinese aircraft and 359 times for Russian aircraft.³ This is the most since the end of the Cold War. As well as increasing in frequency, these incursions have become gradually more dangerous with near misses increasing tension on both sides.⁴

Japan is also feeling more threatened by North Korea with increasing incursions into Japanese airspace by North

Korean military planes. North Korea has become more bellicose with its rhetoric against Japan and the testing of long range missiles in 2012 and 2013. With its nuclear arsenal, North Korea has worried many in Japan.

Japan has also begun to doubt US security guarantees because of China's growing strength and its area denial tactics which aim to make it too costly for the US to operate within the first island chain. The US' inaction in Syria and other crisis have also dented their credibility. These developments have left Japan feeling increasingly threatened, prompting significant economic, military and Political changes. Japan has been boosting its own national security capabilities, has been looking to forge stronger links with other

threatened states in South and South East Asia and has also sought to strengthen ties with the USA.

Abenomics

Since his election in 2012, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has spearheaded the change in Japanese society to meet the growing threats that Japan faces. One of the most important has been the weak Japanese economy that has been inert since the early 1990s with economic problems including low growth, deflation and a high sovereign debt of 240% of GDP.⁵ Abe's

plan to overcome this has been through reforms, dubbed Abenomics, which form a three pronged attempt to reform the economy through monetary, fiscal, and structural policies.

These policies seem to be having some success as economic growth has increased to a forecasted 1.2% and the Yen has weakened in value which should increase exports.⁶ A healthy economy is an important prerequisite to enable the higher military spending and military modernisation that Japan seems to be moving towards to maintain its security. A strong economy is also important to ensure that Japan remains a major donor to international organisations, as it is currently the second largest contributor and also enabling Japan to use economic diplomacy in general.⁷

The plans have however hit some problems. In response to a weakening Yen, China threatened a currency war because stronger

Economic growth and security is vital to Mr Abe's security plans

Japanese exports may threaten Chinese exports.⁸ Japan's move to join the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) free trade agreement has also been seen by China as part of the USA's plan to isolate and encircle China. It has however strengthened US Japanese cooperation.⁹

Military

Since 1947 Japan has been restrained by its pacifist constitution, specifically Article 9 which 'forever' renounces war as a 'sovereign right' and also renounces 'the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes'. It includes prohibitions upon various offensive weapons such as aircraft carriers. However on July 1st the Japanese cabinet significantly reinterpreted the constitution to allow for collective self-defence and also further relaxing the limits on Japan's United Nations peacekeeping operations.¹⁰ This is the most significant reinterpretation since the creation of the constitution but it is not the first. Constitutional reinterpretation and military reforms have been occurring for over 20 years. Japan has been upgrading its military since the 1990s when the process was led by politicians such as Ozawa who called for 'normalisation' of Japan's military to a suitable size equivalent to its economic strength and in keeping with other major world powers.¹¹ As Panton demonstrates, Japan has been reinterpreting Article 9 for decades to justify actions in sending peacekeepers to

Japan has been reinterpreting its constitution for decades, this is however the most significant reinterpretation yet

conflict areas.¹² Although this can be seen as part of the long process of normalisation, it is also an indication of an acceleration of that process caused by increasing fear of China and to counter China's growing strength in the Asia Pacific.

In 2013-14 the Japanese military had a budget of US\$49 billion, a 3% increase on the

previous year. However as a percentage of its GDP it remains low, representing only 1% of GDP. This is much less than China's at US\$188 billion, 2% of GDP and Russia's, at US\$88 billion, 4.1%.¹³ It has 240,000 military personnel as well as a large navy and air force.¹⁴

However much of Japan's equipment is old and does not given it a full spectrum capability, having filled roles for the USA during the Cold war such as mine sweeping. It has however begun a modernisation and adaption program that is set to increase the defence budget to \$240 billion over the next 5 years up 2019, an increase of 5%.¹⁵ This has involved new equipment acquisitions as well as adapting military strategy. This can be seen as an acceleration of the gradual change occurring in Japan in regards to defence, which has occurred as a reaction to China's recent assertiveness over the past two years.

One of the first is through the establishment of an amphibious assault unit capable of securing outlying Japanese islands if they are invaded. The Japan Ground Self Defence Force have been training in amphibious assault with U.S. Marines since 2012 and are aiming to buy 52

amphibious assault vehicles by 2019. They aim to have an amphibious capability that includes new helicopter carriers and landing craft, along with a 3,000-strong army unit modelled on the U.S. Marine Corps.¹⁶

Ballistic missile defence

Japan has been investing in ballistic missile defence since North Korea started testing ballistic missiles in 1998. Japan currently has six destroyers with the Aegis missile system and has recently ordered another two which

will start production in 2015 and 2016.¹⁷ The efficacy of ballistic missile defence may however be quite limited, especially against multiple advanced missiles. They may

have some utility against North Korea but they may raise tension with China and increase Chinese production of missiles.

China may also be working on a ballistic missile defence system having recently had a successful land-based missile interception test.¹⁸ It has also emerged that hackers from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) stole information about Israel's Iron dome missile defence system.¹⁹ As missile defence systems can in theory make it easier to launch offensive attacks, the development of (effective or at least perceived effective) missile defence systems could destabilise the region.

Aircraft carriers

One of the most important acquisitions has been of two new 22DDH-class (Izumo) helicopter destroyers which should be commissioned in 2015 and 2017. They are flat decked destroyers, displacing 27,000 tonnes and envisaged to be a helicopter aircraft carrier to form part of the amphibious assault capacity. However they do have the potential to be retro fitted with a ski jump and heat shielding which would allow them to act as a full aircraft carrier and carry fixed wing aircraft such as the new Lockheed Martin F-35

Japan has begun a program of military modernisation and is gaining a power projection capability

Lightning II. Japan has recently ordered 42 new F-35A fighter jets which could not function with a ski jump off the Izumo. However the F-35B short take-off/vertical landing (STOVL)

variant would function on it and so it is entirely plausible that they may change their order.²⁰ When a Senior Japanese navy official was asked about the aircraft carrier potential of the Izumo helicopter destroyer they said that the intention was to simply use helicopters on it. This does however not diminish their potential for fairly rapid conversion. The navy is already considering using drones on the new destroyers which would give some important experience at using fixed wing aircraft off them, an important learning process if they were to use jets in the future.²¹

These developments have given Japan a latent offensive capability, which has enabled it to circumvent the constitutional prohibition on offensive capabilities until such time that the constitution is reinterpreted or amended. The

Izumo project was started in 2009, five years before the recent constitutional reinterpretation, which only allows for collective self-defence and not offensive carriers. If the constitution is completely changed in the future then Japan would be able to quickly project power.

Although not a recent development, Japan still has a latent nuclear capability. Although it seems highly unlikely that they would push to create a nuclear weapon, there is always the potential for them to create one in 3-5 years.

Arms exports

In April 2014 Japan lifted a self-imposed ban on arms exports dating back to 1967.²² This will help to make Japan's military reforms and modernisation cheaper through economies of scale as well as improving the quality of Japan's own weapons systems. It can also be used as an important area for export and can be used to strengthen its security bonds with both regional and international powers. Japan's largest military contractor, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd has recently been approved to export sensors for use in air-defence missiles manufactured by the US Defence company Raytheon, which will then be exported to Qatar.²³ Japan also cleared a Japan-Britain research project involving technology for air-to-air missiles for both the Typhoon and F-35 jets.²⁴ It is also working with the Australian defence industry to sign a deal to jointly

produce 12 submarines for the Australian navy using Japanese propulsion technology.²⁵

Japan has also recently agreed to sell 6 coastal patrol boats to Vietnam²⁶ and 10 boats to the Philippines to help each country to police their territorial waters and prevent Chinese incursion into them.²⁷ India is also likely to

sign a deal to buy Japanese search and rescue planes which could be worth US\$1.65 billion.²⁸

The defence exports are likely to start off small and mostly involve components as above, but in the long term they may

expand to complete weapons systems such as planes. Although Japanese weapons are untested in conflict, the technological prowess that Japan has could make them a world leader on systems such as UAVs or missile boats.²⁹ They may struggle against US and Russian arms, especially because US arms sales are often linked to military assistance packages. Although this provision seems unlikely at the moment, in the future Japan may offer military assistance as part of a weapons deal.

Normative changes

Such changes would not have been possible ten years ago as they would have met major opposition. PM Abe had signalled his intention to completely revise the constitution and remove Article 9, but this faced significant opposition from both Upper and Lower Houses, and from the Japanese population. Polls suggested strong opposition to

Allowing arms exports will enable Japan to reduce the cost of this military modernisation and benefit from the diplomatic influence that it gives

constitutional revision with 48 percent opposition to the change compared to 42 percent support for the change.³⁰ Abe therefore had to settle for the reinterpretation but it does go some way to normalising the Japanese military in the eyes of the Japanese people, which may then allow further constitutional change in the future.

There are changes occurring in Japanese society that have made these developments possible. The number of people who experienced WW2 has significantly declined in recent decades so there is less of a direct link with Japan's imperial past. China's assertiveness also prompted the change. The people of Japan are also increasingly afraid of China, with 68% of Japanese believing that China is the greatest threat it faces and 85% believe that territorial disputes with China could lead to military conflict.³¹ This is likely to make people more willing to allowing changes that they believe will keep them safe.

History has also become an important issue recently. China has been well known for using history to increase nationalist sentiment among school children, especially in promoting an image of China as the victim of outside aggression and downplaying the internal conflict during the Mao era. However Japan has also started to alter the way that history is taught by including more 'patriotic history' and culling current textbooks which are 'ideologically prejudiced expressions based on

self-torturing views of history'.³² The proposed changes include reducing the attention played to war crimes during the 1930s and 40s. If these changes remain, then combined with the demographic changes, young people in Japan are increasingly likely to be disconnected from their history which still has an important influence on modern regional politics.

Reaction to the changes

There have been mixed reactions to Japan's growing regional strategic importance, especially their constitutional reinterpretation. China, the Republic of Korea and Peoples Republic of Korea have signalled their alarm

China has run a public diplomacy campaign to convince people that Japan still harbours imperial ambitions

at the change. China has said that 'We are concerned about whether Japan continues to walk the road of peaceful development, and hope the Japanese [will] not to do harm

[to]regional peace and stability'.³³ They have also been criticised for undermining the post-WW2 international order.³⁴ South Korea has also not welcomed the changes but they have had to temper their reaction because of their alliance with the US.³⁵

This is understandable considering the history involved, but it demonstrates that there has been a failure of Japan's public diplomacy strategy to convince its neighbours of its benign intentions. Japan has issued many apologies for the war crimes committed in the 1930s and 40s and has tried to push Japanese soft power but actions such as PM Abe's visits

to the Yasukuni shrine and diminishing the teaching of war crimes have undermined the message Japan was trying to achieve.

This plays into the Chinese narrative of a dangerous and provocative Japan that has reignited its imperial ambitions. China has been running a long term public diplomacy campaign to discredit Japan both within China and internationally. By resurrecting news stories and establishing museums about Japanese war crimes in the 1930s and 40s, the implication is that the same motivations are present today. Daily news stories about the atrocities have been

published to convince Japan and the international community to stop Japan's constitutional change³⁶ and persuade countries in the Asia Pacific that Japan is

still dangerous and should not be used to balance Chinese regional power. China has also combined this with significant military diplomacy. Chinese General Fan Changlong, a vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission visited Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia and signed agreements with Australia and New Zealand to increase defence cooperation.

However Chinese tactics to discredit Japan appear to be failing. These countries feel threatened by China's strategy to gain de facto control of the South China Sea through building islands, using their coast guard to control the area and by settling various islands.³⁷ Many are therefore welcoming

Japan's changes. When General Fan met with Indonesian Defence Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro, Purnomo raised the issue of China's aggression in the South and East China Seas. He said 'Indonesia is not a claimant in the South China Sea dispute. However, as part of Indonesia's role in multilateral cooperation, we want the South China Sea to be a peaceful and open sailing area given the fact that ships carrying commodities pass through the area'.³⁸ Indonesia has welcomed the Japanese constitutional change, believing that Japan will show self-restraint and become a responsible

Much of Asia has welcomed Japan's recent changes, especially those nations in conflict with China in the South China Sea

regional actor taking a more proactive role.³⁹ There have been signs that Indonesia is likely to take a more important role in East Asia, especially in mediating disputes with China. Good relations with Japan are

going to make this more likely.

Both the Philippines and Vietnam have welcomed this change, with Philippine President Benigno Aquino III supporting the move and Vietnam recently agreeing to establish an 'extensive strategic partnership' with Japan.⁴⁰ Japan has also been critical of China's actions in the South China Sea. They have also been empowering countries in South East Asia to defend their own territory through selling both the Philippines and Vietnam the coastal patrol vessels.

Japan has gained significant support from Australia in the form of a 'strategic' defence relationship between the two countries and

new technology-sharing agreements. They also recently signed the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) which should boost trade.⁴¹ Australian PM Tony Abbott has said that Australia and Japan have a ‘special relationship’.

Japan is also receiving support from India which has been rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific both economically and strategically for nearly two decades under its ‘Look East’ policy, and this seems to be deepening under Modi and Abe. They have a good personal relationship and are looking to strengthen ties

on militarily and civilian issues as Modi has stated that partnership with Japan is a high priority. The US, Japan and India held a trilateral naval exercise in July⁴² and as

discussed above the potential deal for Japan to sell search and rescue planes. They are also seeking a civilian nuclear power deal which has long been a sticking point between the two.⁴³ As these relations continue to deepen Japan is likely to press India for more support on issues such as the Senkaku/Dyongi islands.

The US welcomed the change and has wanted Japan to take a greater role in its self-defence for years. The constitutional reinterpretation has strengthened the US-Japanese alliance because it allows for Japan to assist the USA if they were attacked and they can for example intercept missiles fired at the USA.

Japan has therefore benefitted from a fear of China and is largely being supported in its

constitutional changes and growing regional role by those states in South East Asia as a way to balance China’s growing power. The new power of Japan to assist in defending other nations is going to significantly alter the power balance in the region.

Immediate implications

In the short term there are unlikely to be any major changes. China and Japan still have large economic interests and they are unlikely to threaten them with hostile acts. There has however been a Japanese economic de-linking

Deeping security relations with India may make China feel encircled

from China with Japanese investment in China halved in the first six months of 2014. Much of this investment is being redirected to South East Asia, especially the ASEAN countries.⁴⁴ There has however not been high level diplomatic communication between Japan and China since the Japanese Government nationalized three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in September 2012.⁴⁵ This increases the likelihood that an incident could escalate without high level communication. This risk is further increased because the international ambiguity of the reinterpretation magnifies the potential for increased tactical and strategic risk taking at a time when regional security tensions are intensifying. There was a brief meeting between the Chinese and Japanese Foreign Ministers at the ASEAN Regional Forum in August; however it is unclear what was said.⁴⁶

Long term implications

There are going to be many long reaching consequences for Japan's increased importance and engagement in Asian politics. Japan will now have a significant impact on China's regional calculation and on the balance of power. If China continues to aggressively push its interests then its neighbours are likely to push back by aligning more closely with Japan, making it a stronger balancing force in the region.

This seems likely as China's neighbours are very concerned about the risk of conflict with China. In a Pew Research centre Poll, 93% of people in the Philippines were 'concerned' that a territorial dispute with China could lead to a military conflict. The concern was similarly high in other countries with Vietnam at 84%, South Korea at 83% and Malaysia at 66%.⁴⁷ The US will continue to play an important role but Japan could become another power offering collective self-defence if security relations with friendly powers continue to deepen. China may begin to feel surrounded by an anti-China axis led by Japan if these defence relations, especially with India deepen.

Complete revision of article 9 would reduce the ambiguity of the constitution and with it the likelihood of brinksmanship and gambling from China because Japan would not be prohibited from taking military action if Japan

was invaded. It is still unclear whether Japan would be entitled to treat an invasion of a Japanese island as an attack if no civilians or military are attacked. Constitutional revision would change that.

In the long term the populations of Japan and China may become more hostile to one another. Abe's visiting of the Yasukuni shrine and the changing of the history books play into the Chinese narrative of Japanese neo-imperial ambitions, which impact upon public opinion in both nations. Each population may become less war averse and extremists on both sides may attempt to force a conflict by making moves seen as antagonistic, such as planting

national flags on disputed islands.

Buoyed by extra confidence, Japan will start engaging in areas of strategic interest to both Russia and China. This is going to be especially true in areas of the Islamic world. Japan has already

been deepening its relationship with Central Asia, with its interests in energy and rare earth minerals; they aim to break China's dominance of the rare earth minerals market by investing in Kazakhstan.⁴⁸ They have also recently signed the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), a free trade agreement aimed at boosting mineral imports from Mongolia.⁴⁹

Japan may also use this growing influence to push for a greater role in the UN, possibly a permanent seat on the Security Council.

However in the medium to long term the US

Japan will balance China's power in the region and in strategically important areas such as Central Asia

may change its view if Japan begins to threaten the US' interests in the region. If the US begins to feel concerned about this they may remove their support for Japan and hedge on playing China against Japan and vice versa for such purposes as long as it serves its interests. This is however long term thinking and much of Japan's growing influence will depend upon the success or failure of abenomics.

Japan remains a healthy democracy and it is very unlikely that militarism will return to the country to any great degree. In spite of this there is still a valid concern from some of Japan's neighbours as to its intentions, especially in light of an apparent white wash of imperial history. Japan is however going to have an important impact by balancing China's power in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, including the Islamic world. This role is likely to grow in future decades.

About 'Resurgence of Russia and China programme':

As the US starts to scale down its 'heavy footprint' from the Islamic-world; the resurgence of new powers becomes crucial to evaluate. The rise of today's regional and tomorrow's global power and their internal and external policies will determine future discourses. Among the rising economies and military powers; Russia and China stand out the most.

Russia has become a key global actor in the aftermath of Syrian revolution. It is the first time since the end of the cold war that Russia is not only directly involved in managing global affairs but has even managed to dictate them in Syria as well as in Georgia Taking further advantage from its new role of an emerging global power; Russia is now seeking new relations in different regions of the Islamic-world i.e. Middle East (Egypt, Syria), Central and South Asia etc.

Chinese foreign policy in the different regions of the Islamic-world can be seen a combination of foreign policy approaches. The over-riding themes of Chinese foreign policy however remains limited to the projection of 'soft power' mixed with economic interaction and developmental strategies. This paradigm may not be sustainable in the near-future as the global system seems to shift towards multi-polarity. Chinese inter-relations with the US hard power and their economic interdependency may empower its soft foreign policy approaches. If however, these trends continue to change as the current geo-strategic trends demonstrate,

Chinese foreign policy may have to radically change in terms of projecting its economic and military power in order to cater for its huge energy demands, resources and raw material etc.

Furthermore; although China and Russia may have different geopolitical interests; they have also found common grounds and convergences of interests on different global issues. As the US tries to 'rebalance' Asia Pacific and Eastern Europe: the convergences of interests are likely to steadily grow in the near to mid-term future.

Finally; as the internal unrest grows in many parts of the Islamic-world; the role of emerging power such as China and Russia will be hugely important to monitor.

Key Feature of the programme:

- Analysis of China and Russia's historic development in the last few decades
- Analysis of contemporary socio-political trends within China and Russia
- Analysis and evaluation of current Chinese and Russian foreign policy models and paradigms, particularly in the regions of the Islamic-world
- Exploration and evaluation of China and Russia's military and defence strategies
- Exploration and evaluation of Chinese cyber-warfare capabilities
- Analysis of fragility or sustainability of western power and Pax-Americana
- Analysis of the inter-relation of the emerging powers i.e. India, Brazil, Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar etc. with China and Russia
- Analysis of new blocs particularly Shanghai cooperation organisation (SCO) or ASEAN and Chinese influence and Russian led 'custom' and 'trade' Unions
- Establishment and anticipation of different Chinese and Russian foreign policy models, using 'futurology' studies and by the above mentioned analyses of current and emerging trends etc.

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