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Japan and its changing security environment

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Since 1989 Japan is faced with the following major issues in its foreign and defence policies:

- the effect of the end of the Cold War on its Soviet threat-centred and US-centred foreign and security policy
- the scope of its involvement in peacekeeping operations against the background of domestic and external opposition
- the inherent instabilities in the diffuse power constellation of the Asia Pacific region, notably the growing assertiveness of China
- the issue of nuclear proliferation.

These issues are, of course, all interrelated and cannot be separated from each other. They constitute some painful dilemmas for Japan which are to be addressed in the following.

1 The effect of the end of the Cold War on its Soviet threat-centred and US-centered foreign and security policy

The Soviet threat had been a convenient vehicle for Japan's government to justify to a generally pacifist or rather apathetic public the close security link with the US and the need for some measure of military preparedness. The Japanese-American security alliance has also been the major glue for the overall relationship with the US which has become increasingly burdened with economic competition and trade disputes. While other security threats had always existed and were at times officially recognised by the Japanese government it was generally more convenient to highlight the Soviet threat which was much easier to explain, did not risk to ruffling the feathers of any Asian neighbour and pleased the American security partner.

The thinning out of American forces in the Asia Pacific by 10% over five years as a result of American budgetary problems rather than of the end of the Cold War and its complete withdrawal from the Philippines has increased the expectation of the Japanese public for less defence expenditures and has threatened the rationale for the latest 5-year equipment buildup of the SDF. How can the government now switch its official threat scenario to other countries, notably China and North Korea without offending these countries? Is the conclusion from the partial withdrawal of the US from the Asia Pacific that Japan should rely more on its own military efforts, thus rising the ever present spectre in Asia of Japanese militarism?

It is therefore understandable that the Japanese government has been very reluctant to acknowledge any major change in Japan's security environment. This hesitation has been initially supported by the fact that the effects of the end of the East-West conflict have been delayed in Asia while several Communist countries still continue to exist and Russia has been using Siberia as a storage facility (or rather scrap yard in view of climatic conditions) for weapon systems it had to withdraw from the European theatre under previous arms control agreements. Until the 1989 edition of the Defence White Paper the Soviet Union was described as a potential threat, while the latest edition in 1992 speaks of Russian forces as a factor causing instability regarding the security of the region.¹ A major factor for the government's prevarications has also been the domestic paralysis of the political system because of sex, corruption, bank and yakuza scandals, a deepening economic recession, and weak political leadership, all of which allowed the top bureaucracy to stick to its old East-West schema

This hesitant and uninspired attitude towards major changes in the global and regional environment has several consequences:

- Clinging to the old East-West framework Japan continues to harp on the territorial conflict with Russia, thus missing a window of opportunity at the beginning of the Gorbachev regime to solve the conflict. Instead it has resisted helping Russia with its economic rehabilitation while widening the gap with its Western allies.
- Trying not to create any more problems with the US Japan has so far resisted contributing to the development of a regional security consultation process because the US has opposed such a development. The result has been growing concern in other Asian countries about US retrenchment, China's growing assertiveness and the possibility of Japan being forced therefore to handle its security single-handedly.
- Japan's attempt to involve its military force in PKO by further widening the interpretation of its so-called Peace Constitution was in response to the allied effort in the Gulf War for more Japanese contribution to the maintenance of international security, but the coincidence with the end of the Cold War raised major domestic and regional concern.

The changing Japan-US military relationship

The intimate Japanese-American relationship is weakening and the mutually reinforcing main pillars of this relationship - the military alliance and economic interdependence - are now becoming a liability. Until recently politicians on both sides could prevent any major spill over from the increasingly bitter economic disputes to the military alliance. This is now changing. American public support for the Japanese-American alliance is diminishing because many Americans consider Japan's economic challenge more of a threat now than anything else, particularly after the demise of the Soviet Union. Japanese public support for the military alliance pillar is diminishing because of the end of the Cold War, growing self confidence and nationalism.

So far the US pressed Japan to do more for its national as well as for regional defence. The implicit understanding has been that the US would always be able to call the shots and that a growing Japanese defence establishment with increased military responsibilities, a growing Japanese self confidence in view of its economic achievement and military clout, and the relative decline in America's economic and military strength would not challenge this assumption. This complacent American attitude is somewhat changing. In view of the unclear Japanese policy and US partial retrenchment the US-Japan security is increasingly becoming a treaty to reassure East Asians ('cap in the bottle') as well as to insure Japan's security against external threats. This indirect function of the Security treaty is much more difficult to explain to public opinion in the US and Japan. It is injurious to Japan's growing self confidence and may prove an insufficient justification of expenditures to the American public.

In view of the growing instabilities in the Asia Pacific region and the continued distrust of Japan by the Asian neighbours, Japan's defence planners are realising that a continued security alliance with the US is in their best interest. There will, however, be more discussion on increased Japanese defence burden sharing coupled with increased Japanese participation in regional defence policy matters.

Japan's military expenditures/hardware

Japan has been continuously increasing its defence expenditures in the last decade and has not abandoned this course. However, the rate of increase has diminished since 1990. Japan's military budget for the current Fiscal Year 1992/99 amounts to Yen 45,518 Oku or £ 25 bn (1 = Yen 180) and the rate of increase for the coming fiscal year 1993/94 has been set at 3.6% to reach £ 26.5 bn, a record low increase rate. In Fiscal year 1991 the contract orders for weapons suffered the first year-on-year decline in seven years: 9.7%. Moreover 40% of the annual budget is for personnel expenditures, including food, and almost 40% is already committed through procurement orders made in the past. There is therefore not much room for flexibility and cuts can only be effected in the procurement of major weapon systems and munition supplies. In December 1992 the government lowered the budget ceiling five-year defence programme for 1991-1996, resulting in an annual growth cut of that budget from 3% to 2.1%. Finally the government is revising its 1976 Defence Plan which envisaged 180,000 men for the ground forces, 60 anti-submarine ships 16 submarines and 430 aircraft for the air force. The army never reached this goal standing now at 150,000, while the navy has 43,000 and the air force 44,000 men. The ground forces therefore correspond at least in manpower to those of Britain. The US has 47,000 men under arms in Japan and Japan shoulders an increasingly high share of its costs.

Observers who distrust Japan tend to stress different aspects of Japan's military. For them Japan has one of the highest military budgets in the world and has built up the most modern armed forces in the region apart from those of the US and Russia. In addition through an emphasis on national procurement 90% of the hardware is produced in Japan, either with own technology which benefits from its highly advanced civilian technology base, or under licence, mostly from the

US. However, this armed force operates under unprecedented political constraints - although these are constantly being relaxed- and the force is highly integrated into American security policy - although Japan's growing nationalism against the background of increasing trade frictions with the US may weaken this integration. Critical observers tend therefore to see the Japanese armed forces as a moratorium force, overrating the political instrumentalities for abolishing these restraints against a public opinion where a mix of pacifism, political apathy, and the belief in the almighty power of financial power to protect the country's national interests works strongly against military power and its exercise.

2 The scope of its involvement in peacekeeping operations against domestic and external opposition

The experience of the Gulf War 1991 has been a crucial experience in pushing Japan further than ever in reconsidering its constitutional restraints on the use of military force. Japan finally adopted a PKO Cooperation Bill in June 1992 after a very painful domestic decision process. Later in the year the SDF was sent for its first deployment to Cambodia.

The debate about the PKO bill between 1990-92 exposed all the problems which Japan has with sharing greater responsibility for international peace and with adapting its ambiguous defence policy to the changes of the post Cold War world. Behind all the restraints and limitations put into the new PKO law looms the distrust of even senior politicians in the ruling LDP in the ability of the political system to control a more activist security role, particularly if it involves the SDF which operates anyway in a contested legal framework. It is therefore understandable that Japan's neighbours feel somehow uneasy about Japanese soldiers in Cambodia while Japan is still refusing to fully acknowledge its past in the region. The new law in itself is riddled with ambiguities and contradictions. The most acute problem arising from the law is at present the stipulation that Japanese PKO troops cannot stay on if fighting erupts again. Fighting between the Khmer Rouge and the former Vietnam-supported regime has resumed and the government is acutely embarrassed by the opposition which demands a withdrawal of Japan's 600 soldiers which are involved in infrastructure repairs.

There is concern inside and outside of Japan that some politicians see the involvement in PKO as a way to change the Constitution, to legitimize the SDF and to provide it with a new rationale after the demise of the Cold War. Recent statements by Japanese politicians have not helped although most Asian leaders recognise to a greater or lesser degree the need for Japan to become more involved in peace keeping operations. Mitsuzuka Hiroshi, one of the four top executives in the LDP, was recently quoted as saying that "I feel the forces must be built up so that our policy is compatible with that of the UN Charta."² Japan's foreign minister in January 1993, saying that the role of the SDF from now on "should be to maintain global peace and order under the auspices of the UN" and asking for more long range aircraft and ships to fulfill such a role.³ In addition the ruling party has put again the revision of the Peace Constitution on the agenda in order to reduce the constitutional ambiguities of the PKO Law while Prime Minister Miyazawa opposes such a move. Even the Socialist Party has recently indicated that it is prepared to reconsider the issue.⁴

3 The inherent instabilities in the diffuse power constellation of the Asia Pacific region

The end of the Cold War has complicated conflict patterns in the Asia Pacific region while tensions on the Korean peninsula and in Indochina have - at least initially - become abated. Without the veil of the communist threat which also served as a rallying point the underlying tensions come out now more clearly. The communist threat has never been a unitary threat because of the existence of rivaling communist powers.

Russia: Russia as the successor state to the former Soviet Union is still considered by Japan's defence planners as a potential threat although they agree that no immediate threat is coming from the disintegrating CIS forces and official Japanese statements have been softened. The major security issue between Japan and Russia is the territorial dispute which prevents both sides from a more constructive dialogue. Japan tries now to internationalise the dispute and to obtain political support from its Western allies. These efforts have not been very successful and Japan has become rather isolated. Europe is deeply concerned about economic chaos leading to political chaos on its borders, and the Americans share with them concern about nuclear proliferation.

The Russians offered conflicting time tables on the withdrawal of Russian troops from the disputed territories. In May 1992 Yeltsin had mentioned to Foreign Minister Watanabe 1993-94 for the removal of Soviet troops from the Northern territories but in August 1992 he promised removal by mid-1995. According to Russian military documents there are about 7,000 Russian troops and 430 naval personnel stationed on the 4 islands.⁵ The territorial dispute prevents also the realisation of confidence building measures such as the conclusion of an incident at sea agreement or the exchange of high level military personnel which had been agreed earlier. It is possible that both countries get into a spiral of hostility which is fed by the intransigence of both sides on the territorial dispute and by radical power shifts in Russia which favour the military.

China: China is a much greater security concern for Japan in the long run because of its growing political and economic expansiveness. Due to its geography and demography it can have more impact on the Asia Pacific region than Russia. China is for Japan a huge country torn between economic development with capitalist features and a ruling clique which wants to master this economic development while maintaining its power position. Japan has great sympathy for the perception of the ruling clique which considers itself as the only guarantor of this radical development. Moreover, both, the Japanese government and the Chinese Communist Party, agree that economic reform is the only way to maintain stability. There is great concern that the new Clinton administration will exert too much pressure on China because of its human rights record, its arms export policy and its considerable trade surplus with the US.⁶ The Japanese attitude versus China is also influenced by its concern about China's military capabilities, notably its nuclear forces whereas the Chinese leaders are concerned about Japan's growing political and military power and assertiveness. Against this back-

ground where Japan and China view stability - i.e. the status quo as maintained by the present rulers - as the foremost interest, Japan has started to differ with its other Western partners on how to judge Chinese politics as was e.g. demonstrated in Japan's reaction to the Tiananmen massacre.

The heart of the problem for Japan is to decide whether it is better to appease China or to stand up in order to protect its own national interests. Japan's natural inclination has been so far appeasement because of a cultural tendency to avoid direct confrontation, because of its negative past legacy notably in China and a resulting guilt complex, because a stronger stance would open a lot of worm cans in domestic and international politics, and finally because of its growing confidence in its huge economic power as a replacement of military power. An illustration of Japan's appeasement is the fact that on average once a month Chinese navy ships fire on Japanese trawlers in the East China Sea close to disputed islands in the middle of Japan's sea lanes of communication to S.E.Asia with its many economic links to Japan and to the Middle East. No protest is issued and the Japanese media do not even directly identify the Chinese ships.⁷ There is, however, a group of more nationalistic and security-minded politicians in the LDP (e.g. Mitsuzuka of the Takeshita faction) which does not hesitate to express concerns about China's naval capacity and the rapid upgrading of the People's Liberation Army.⁸

Korea: Japan has considerably improved its political relations with South Korea and is economically deeply involved in that country's development process. Since 1991 Japan has also opened negotiations with North Korea to establish diplomatic relations. In spite of a relaxation of tensions on the Korean peninsula a conflict can still not be excluded. Japan's contribution to a peaceful solution of the North-South conflict seems limited in view of the following circumstances:

- The legacy of its past colonial adventure and its insincerity to address it in a forthright manner (e.g. army prostitutes)
- The strong dislike of both Korean states of foreign interference
- Japan's concern about a boomerang effect of high technology transfers to South Korea limits the scope of its contribution to more stability through economic means.

On the other hand economic aid to North Korea could protect South Korea from the economically devastating and thus deeply destabilising effects of reunification. It is doubtful, however, that this scenario of regime change through economic development is possible under the present North Korean Kim dynasty.

The South Korean government still seems to hesitate between dealing with Japan as a potential security threat which would ultimately lead to confrontation, or whether to involve Japan into a security partnership. There is strong opposition against the latter option on both sides.

The nuclear weapon programme of North Korea and the possibility that South Korea might inherit a nuclear weapon programme from North Korea after reunification is of great concern to the Japanese defence planners. North Korean missiles can already reach major parts of Japan.

Some Japanese therefore propose that Japan should think of an ATBM defense against a small number of nuclear missiles from the Korean peninsula or China.⁹ Under the SDI agreement concluded with the US Japanese companies are working on related concepts of such a defence system.

4 What is Japan contributing to greater regional stability?

Japan has so far seen its major contribution to regional security in pursuing economic goals which helped economic development in the region and in maintaining the Japanese-American security treaty despite many bilateral frictions. This approach took account of the pacifism and apathy of the Japanese people as well as of the bad memories of Japan's neighbours. The premise of this policy - American leadership, American military presence and close Japanese-American relations - is weakening and Japan's partners are demanding a greater Japanese contribution to regional stability. In order to avoid the dilemma of increasing tensions and suspicion by giving its contribution too much of a military touch the Japanese government has become more active in areas which are relevant to regional security:

Arms control

For Japan the issue of nuclear proliferation is not only related to the Korean peninsula but also to the successor states of the Soviet Union. Its insistence on a solution of the territorial issue deprives Japan of the influence which it could wield on the basis of its economic and financial power. At the G-7 summit in Munich in July 1992 Japan had proposed that a working party formulates an international plan to help Russia to convert enriched uranium and plutonium retrieved from dismantled nuclear weapons to civilian uses, but because of Yeltsin's cancellation of his visit in September 1992 the Japanese government did not pursue these efforts. On the other hand, other countries, notably the United States, have taken a lead in these efforts but the sulking attitude of Japan deprives this necessary international effort of a very potent pillar.¹⁰

In March 1992 Japan contributed \$12 million aid to a fund for nuclear scientists from the former Soviet Union. FM Watanabe proposed a global system for the control of nuclear proliferation with the secretariat to be located in Japan (March 1992). MITI proposes inversed COCOM regulations to prevent export of strategic goods from the former Soviet Union. Against the background of the territorial dispute it is doubtful how far Japan will realise these promises and intentions.

Japan's own massive nuclear energy programme with considerable plutonium stocks and reprocessing facilities limits, however, in the eyes of many countries in the region the credibility of Japan's commitment to non nuclear proliferation, or at least reduces its efficiency.

Closely linked to nuclear non proliferation is the prevention of the spread of delivery vehicles for nuclear but also chemical and biological weapons. Japan is member of the Missile Technology Control Regime.

Japan is not a straight arms exporter although it exports dual purpose items. Together with the EC Japan initiated a UN resolution to create an arms sales registry.

Linking ODA to security

In 1991 the Japanese government decided that ODA policy will take in future into consideration the trend of recipient countries military expenditure, including the trend in their development and production of mass destructive weapons and their participation in the international arms trade. In addition their efforts to promote democracy, a market-oriented economic policy and basic human rights will also be considered. The policy is, however, easier applied to Haiti to which Japan suspended aid after the coup d'état in 1991 than to cases like China where Japan's immediate security interests are perceived to lie more with supporting economic reform even if this does indirectly contribute to the strengthening of China's military-industrial complex, arms exports, and its military forces in general.

Japan's role in a regional security dialogue

There has recently been a change in Japan's refusal to support multilateral dialogue on regional security. The reasons for this refusal were the American opposition to it, regional sensitivities which feared either a leading security role by Japan and/or a weakening of ASEAN as a regional organisation. Japan has apparently reconsidered its attitude in the light of the increasing threats to regional stability, the distrust of Japan's future security policy and the American retrenchment in the region.

The first proposal for regional security discussions was made by PM Miyazawa at the meeting of the ASEAN post ministerial conference (PMC) in summer 1992. The Japanese government considers the ASEAN PMC as the appropriate forum for such dialogue.¹¹ It was interesting to note that the proposal had not been cleared beforehand with the Bush administration and was therefore received very coolly. Miyazawa proposed again in January 1993 in his Bangkok speech that discussions should be undertaken on regional security and that Japan would actively take part in such discussions. The wording was, however, more vague than in summer 1992.

Conclusions

In the absence of any clear information how far American military and political retrenchment in the Asia Pacific region will go and how far a more inward-looking administration will push the economic disputes with Japan it is very difficult to predict where the country's security policy will go. The complicated security environment since 1989 has not yet sunk in and weaknesses in the political leadership and economic problems will prevent any sharp reorientation bar a major turn for the worst in Russia, China or the Korean peninsula.

Ultimately the relevance of Japan's military power resides not so much in the size of its defence budget or of its military force but rather in the perceived potential of becoming a state which has the capability to use military force. This potential is enhanced by the following factors:

1. the country's economic, financial and technological foundation which provides it with a considerable 'surge capability'
2. the considerable military force which it has already now
3. its political ambiguity in the eyes of other countries owing to its prewar record, the constantly widening interpretations of political and constitutional limits, and due to 'peer pressure' because many Japanese consider their country an incomplete power without military power commensurate to its economic power or at least commensurate to the military power of countries like France and Britain
4. the military alliance with the US and the option to go alone.

*) This paper was delivered at the Workshop on the "Changing security in the Asia Pacific Region after 1989" on the 17 February 1993, Newcastle East Asia Centre, University of Newcastle upon Tyne (see ASIEN, [April 1993] 47, pp.76-77).

Notes:

- 1) "Japan's defense dilemma", **Japan Times** 24 August 1992.
- 2) "Expand UN troop role, Tokyo party figure says", **International Herald Tribune** 4 February 1993.
- 3) "Japan searches for Asian role", **The Independent** 11 January 1993.
- 4) "Decision to review peace constitution", **Financial Times** 14 January 1993.
- 5) **Kyodo** 9.9.92 in FBIS-EAS-92-175 9.9.92 p.8.
- 6) Satoh Yukio, "Motomerareru Nihon no hasso tenkan (A conceptional change by Japan is needed)", **Gaiko Foramu**, January 1993, no.52, pp.26-35.
- 7) "Japan set to lift taboo on making war", **The Independent** 22 January 1993.
- 8) **Financial Times** 4 February 1993.
- 9) Imai, Ryukichi, **Review of new mechanisms to stem nuclear proliferation**, International Institute for Global Peace, Policy Paper, October 1992, p.19.
- 10) "Snub cools arms-conversion ardor here", **Japan Times** 16 September 1992.
- 11) See also the support given to ASEAN PMC by the Seoul Declaration of the Conference on Asia Pacific Security Cooperation in November 1992.