

Japan's Dilemma: Caught between Its “Exclusively Defense-Oriented Policy” and the Demands of the Japan-US Alliance

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What Is Japan's “Exclusively Defense-Oriented Policy”?

In 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers, and the military was disarmed under the rule of the occupying US forces. The new Constitution of Japan, drafted by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers staff, states that sovereignty rests with the people, not with the emperor. It commands the government to respect fundamental human rights. It also states that the sovereign right of the nation to war is forever renounced, and that maintaining land, sea and air armed forces is prohibited. These were welcomed by the Japanese people, who were suffering from a scarcity of goods and restrictions on their freedom, as well as the damage caused by the war.

The renunciation of war in Article 9 came to regulate the fundamental direction of Japanese politics as a symbol of the antiwar inclinations of the Japanese people. Japan depended on the US to ensure its national security, but when Japan achieved economic growth and increased its national power, the US started requesting Japan to strengthen its own defense capabilities from the 1970s. Thus, Japan's defense-related debate is focused on how to handle the contradiction between the cooperation with the US and the anti-war clause in the Constitution.

The exclusively defense-oriented policy has been Japan's basic defense posture since the 1970s. It means that military force can only be used in the event of an attack and to show Japan's defensive posture, but not to threaten other countries. The policy determines the criteria for how the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) comply with Article 9 of Japan's Constitution, which prohibits “the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.” Together with Japan's Three Non-Nuclear Principles, adopted in 1967, which ban the possession, production, and introduction of nuclear weapons into Japanese territory, the exclusively defense-oriented policy formed the foundation of a national consensus for a Japanese security and defense policy proclaiming that Japan will not become a military power that could pose a military threat to other countries.

Specifically, it manifested in the guiding principles for the operations and weapons system employment of Japan's SDF. The principles are the following:

- 1 The right to self-defense is exercised only when an armed attack from a foreign country against Japan occurs or is imminent. The use of force is limited to the minimum necessary to repel the attack.
- 2 Japan does not possess weaponry capable of striking other countries and inflicting catastrophic damage, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), strategic bombers, and aircraft carriers.
- 3 During joint defense operations with the United States in time of emergency, the U.S. Forces can conduct offensive operations, but the SDF is limited to conducting defensive operations within Japanese territory, including protecting US bases and the sea around Japan. In other words, this operational coordination gives the role of the spear to the U.S. Forces and the role of the shield to the SDF.

In the 1970s, Japan, which is geographically located on the frontline of any possible confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union, relied on US deterrence, including the nuclear umbrella, but avoided the risk of getting involved in a war between the two superpowers. The exclusively defense-oriented policy avoided the complications of maintaining strategic stability among superpowers, and limited Japan's role to defending Japanese territory.

Furthermore, although the US encouraged Japan to modernize its defense capacity, it did not want Japan to become an independent military actor. The U.S. Forces in Japan had the double roles of deterring the Soviet Union and providing security assurances to Japan, as well as preventing Japan's military expansion.

The Japan-US Alliance And the Exclusively Defense-Oriented Policy

It was not until the 1980s that the Japanese government started to call the Japan-US relationship, established under the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security an 'alliance.' Until then, terms associated with military alliance had been avoided because of a sense of aversion towards previous wars and the Vietnam War.

Since the late 1970s, the threat from the Soviet Union – who had been making strides in modernizing its military – had increased. As a response, Japan positioned itself as a “member of the West”, and aimed to improve its ability to detect and attack Soviet submarines in the three straits of the Japanese islands as well as along 1,000 nautical miles of sea lanes.

At the time, economic friction between Japan and the US became a significant political issue. Japan took this matter seriously and incorporated the term “Japan-US alliance” as a message to the US, indicating that security relations should be prioritized over economic conflict.

Defending the sea lanes in the Western Pacific expanded the JSDF's role geographically, and it became clear that its position was to complement the military strategy of the US. However, the Japanese government sought public approval by limiting the JSDF's operations to defense and also by emphasizing non-deviation from the exclusively defense-oriented policy.

The End of The Cold War and New Alliance Cooperation

After the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union was collapsed, the Japanese public demanded a reduction in defense expenditures. The Japan-US alliance also lost a common focus and faced ‘the era of drifting.’

During the Gulf War in 1991, Japan was not able to contribute militarily. The experience prompted Japan, as a developed country, to realize the necessity of contributing to international peace. Japan enacted a new law allowing non-combat corps to be deployed to the United Nations peacekeeping operations. The law created a new legal framework that is not contrary to the use of force prohibited under the Constitution. In this framework, Japan sent the JSDF’s corps of engineers to the peacekeeping operations in Cambodia in 1992.

After the development of nuclear weapons in North Korea was revealed in 1993, the necessity for renewed cooperation within the Japan-US alliance seemed required in this new security environment, which was different from the one during the old Cold War between the superpowers.

Japan and the US redefined their alliance and revised the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation in 1997. While the prior guidelines limited defense cooperation between the JSDF and the U.S. Force to a time of emergency in Japan, the new guidelines allowed the JSDF to support the U.S. Force’s operations even if it was not for defending Japan. However, the JSDF’s support was geographically limited to the region near Japan and to non-combat missions, including the transportation of cargo, information sharing, and search and rescue. The Japanese government explained that the SDF’s operation would not exceed the level set by the exclusively defense-oriented policy.

After 9.11, the US declared war on terror and requested countries to join its “Coalition of the Willing.” Japan dispatched the JSDF in 2004 to assist with post-war reconstruction in Iraq, and the Japan-US alliance was said to be “better than ever”. However, JSDF operations were limited to civilian projects such as road repairs, and were separate from the search-and-destroy operations done by the U.S. Forces. The division of roles in this alliance – touted as better than ever before – can be described as “the US eating the food and Japan washing the dishes, along with NATO”. Or in other words, Japan and the NATO clean up after the US fought the war.

On another note, no soldier has been killed or injured during these JSDF overseas operations, which is a reason why the majority of the Japanese public are in support of such dispatches.

The Rise of China

China emerged as a threat to US dominance while the US was focused on the war against terrorism. As the US came to prioritize withdrawal from the Middle East, the Japan-US alliance lost its quality described as “better than ever before”. Now it faces a new phase of drifting.

When the US pursued dialogue with China and considered reducing military expenditures, Japan became concerned about the credibility of the US security assurance to Japan. Therefore, Japan set out to strengthen the Japan-US alliance assertively to seek further security reassurance from the US.

In 2015, Japan enacted a national security bill. It is a policy package, including the below-mentioned capacities of the JSDF:

- 1 Exercising the right to collective self-defense – which had been understood as a violation of the Constitution since WWII – in order to conduct operations for protecting U.S. Forces in a situation other than a time of emergency in Japan.
- 2 Providing logistic supports to U.S. Forces when they are engaged in military activities in regional hotspots. Such support includes supplying ammunition and refueling aircraft that are conducting military operations.
- 3 Protecting US naval vessels and aircraft during joint operations, such as military drills and surveillance.

This led to the advancement of the operational integration of the JSDF and the U.S. Forces. By enacting the national security legislation, Japan chose to be involved in wars launched by US armed forces, and thus attempted to allay concerns about potentially being “forsaken” by the US.

The exclusively defense-oriented policy based on the separation of the SDF’s operation from the U.S. Force’s combat operation is now in name only. However, the Legislation for Peace and Security does not suggest that the SDF can strike an adversary’s territory.

The Missile Arms Race

The exclusively defense-oriented policy is also being challenged by the development of ballistic missiles. The interception of ballistic missiles is difficult, and the missiles can be carried by mobile launchers. It is impossible to destroy all these missiles.

With the aspiration of being able to strike missiles bases in a foreign country, Japan started to develop long-range cruise missiles and high-speed gliding ballistic missiles. Although the Japanese government has not made a decision about it yet, these missiles will likely be introduced to the JSDF. That will virtually end the exclusively defense-oriented policy. Moreover, it will increase the incentive for preemptive strikes. Because of these repercussions, there is a concern about losing the strategic stability Japan has maintained with that policy for such a long time.

China continues to develop and possess intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) to strengthen its ability to intimidate and attack US forces. It has more than 1000 IRBMs that can reach Guam and may be able to attack US aircraft carriers. On the other hand, the US does not possess these kinds of weapons, because of past compliance with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The gap in this capacity has led some people to think that US dominance in the West Pacific is at stake. Now the US plans to develop new intermediate-range missiles and deploy them to Japan.

Japan is becoming the center of a new missile arms race. However, Japan and the US would have a different perception of the threat posed to their security, because Japan and China are within the range of intermediate-range missiles, whereas the US is not. Furthermore, the deployment of missiles to Japan would be politically difficult because local people would oppose it.

Conclusion

The optimal plan for Japanese deterrence amidst the US-China confrontation is nowhere in sight. If Japan's deterrence strategy focused on expanding missile force, it would only increase the risk of Japan getting involved in a missile war. It is clear that 'balance of terror' is not the most suitable solution for Japan. What Japan needs to do now is reassess the meaning of the exclusively defense-oriented policy and change its approach by pursuing a conflict-mitigating diplomacy and seek an exit that way. The exclusively defense-oriented policy "does not make the opponent surrender by force; it is a strategy that does not win the war". This – paradoxical as it may seem – is intended to eliminate fear of Japan, which is the primary cause behind neighboring countries possibly attempting to wage war against Japan. The US deterrence strategy, on the other hand, is to strike fear into the hearts of potential enemies: it is intended to deter opponents from waging war against the US by threatening to take revenge.

Postwar Japan has been utilizing both types of approach in its security policy for different purposes. If we incline towards the deterrence strategy though, we may face the increasing risk of getting involved in a US-China war. Reconstructing Japan's national security is being called into question here.

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