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Reprint

# Japan: Stepping Forward but Not Stepping Out

Gerald L. Curtis

**EDITOR'S NOTE** This year marks the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, and the occasion falls as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe seeks to expand Japan's security and defense posture. In light of the executions of Japanese citizens in the Middle East, all eyes have been on Abe and his activist foreign policy.

The U.S.–Japan alliance is healthy and the two allies are in the final stages of revising the guidelines for defense cooperation. However, Japan's relations with China and South Korea have been strained as a result of disputes over Japan's role in World War II and territorial claims.

Recently, the Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) at the NCAFP started a U.S.–China–Japan trilateral dialogue to ease tensions between China and Japan while managing the alliance with Japan and maintaining stable relations with China in a complex political environment. The most recent conference emphasized the most important challenge for the major powers in the Asia-Pacific—to contain the downward trend toward strategic rivalry and to start developing a stable and cooperative relationship.

We reprint Professor Gerald L. Curtis' article from a 2014 CSCAP report "Regional Security Outlook 2015" because of its important contribution in understanding Japan's shift in foreign policy.

For decades analysts have been predicting that big changes in Japanese security policy were just around the corner. In the early 1970s Herman Kahn forecasted that Japan would become the 21st century's superstate; in 1987, after Prime Minister Nakasone lifted the one percent of GDP limit on defense spending, Henry Kissinger penned a *Washington Post* op-ed that declared the inevitability of Japan's emergence as a major military power; in 2000 Kenneth Waltz wrote that Japan was gearing up to bolster its conventional forces and build nuclear weapons. None of these predictions panned out, but today it is popular once again to speculate about Japan being on the brink of major changes in its security policy. Could we now be at an inflection point where the views of the realists are finally becoming realistic?

There is no doubt that Prime Minister Abe would like to see Japan have a more robust and muscular foreign policy. There is no question but that Chinese worry that Japan will become a more formidable factor in the regional balance of power. And there is good reason to believe that

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Americans are ambivalent about what they see going on in Tokyo. The Pentagon has welcomed Abe's decision to reinterpret Article Nine of the Constitution to permit collective defense and have Japan make a larger contribution to the alliance. Others in the US government and in the media worry that there may be a link between Abe's revisionist views of the past and his vision of Japan's future.

Prime Minister Abe has been outspoken about his desire to see Japan become more of a normal country, free of many of the constraints on the use of military power that have resulted in Japan punching far below its economic weight in regional and global affairs. Since becoming prime minister in December 2012 he has established a national security council, eased the ban on the export of weapons and weapons technology, got the Diet to pass a controversial classified secrets law, had his cabinet adopt a reinterpretation of Article Nine of the Constitution to permit collective defense, and declared his intention to beef up the ability of Japan's naval and air forces to defend islands at the far reaches of Japan's territorial waters. Abe has established a record for being Japan's most peripatetic prime minister ever, his visit to Beijing for the November APEC summit being the fiftieth country he has visited in less than two years, with repeat visits to several of them. He has paid special attention to ASEAN—Vietnam and the Philippines in particular—as well as Australia and India, the significance of which has not been lost on the Chinese.

This is an impressive list of accomplishments but do they amount to a change in Japan's national security strategy? If the DPJ's Prime Minister Noda had had a secure majority in both houses of the Diet as Prime Minister Abe does now would his security policies have been very different from the strategy Abe is pursuing? If Abe were to vacate the prime minister's office tomorrow, would anyone whom one could reasonably imagine succeeding him push policy in a fundamentally different direction? The answer to all these questions is no.

When the DPJ's "dovish" Naoto Kan was prime minister the government adopted new national defense program guidelines that called for establishment of a "dynamic defense force." Under "hawkish" Shinzo Abe the government's new defense program guidelines calls for a "dynamic joint defense force." Other than adding the word "joint" (to emphasize the importance of cooperation between the Ground,

Maritime, and Air SDF) there is no difference between them.

The DPJ advocated establishment of a National Security Council, as had previous LDP governments; the Abe administration implemented this longstanding recommendation. In July 2012 Prime Minister Noda said in the Diet that he might consider reinterpreting Article Nine to permit collective self-defense. In July 2014 Prime Minister Abe did so. Prime Minister Noda was constrained from increasing the defense budget because of a sluggish economy. Abe did increase it, for the first time in eleven years. But the increase hardly represented a dramatic break with previous policy: it went up 0.8 percent in 2013 and 2.7 percent in the 2014 budget. Annual increases of less than 3 percent are projected for the five fiscal years from 2014–2018.

Since Abe has been prime minister, relations with both China and Korea have been badly strained, but they were not much better when the DPJ was in power. Noda and South Korean President Lee Myung Bak argued over comfort women and Takeshima/Dokdo. Relations between Japan and China reached a nadir with Prime Minister Noda's decision to nationalize three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands that China claims as its own.

So let's be clear: structural factors are far more important than the personality of Japan's current prime minister in driving change in Japanese foreign policy. These factors include the collapse of a bipolar international order that gave Japan the confidence that threats to its security would be perceived by the US as threats to its own, by China's emergence as a great power and by its aggressive actions in the East and South China Sea, and by North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons. It is also being driven by a perception of relative American decline, evidenced by declining defense budgets, political paralysis in Washington, and a public opinion leery of having their country becoming entangled in further military conflicts where there is no clearly discernible threat to American national interests.

In addition to these structural changes in Japan's external environment, there has been a weakening of domestic anti-military sentiment that has long inhibited foreign policy change. "Pacifism" in post-war Japan was of a special kind. It did not mean that Japan denied the importance of military force

to insure the nation's security. What it meant was that a large majority of Japanese rejected the use of *Japanese* military power to do so. Fearful of a resurgence of the military's political influence and lacking confidence in the government's ability to use military power prudently, the majority of the Japanese public preferred to have the government sign on to a grand bargain with the United States that gave the US access to bases in Japan from which it could project its power into the rest of Asia and beyond in return for a guarantee of Japan's territorial security. Domestic anti-militarism continues to act as a brake on the buildup of Japan's military power but far less so than before.

The end of bipolarity—and the end of the decade or so of US unipolarity that followed—has left Japan facing an unstable and dangerous international environment. During the Cold War Japanese worried that alliance with the United States might entangle their country in conflicts of which they wanted no part. But confident that a Soviet threat against Japan would be viewed in Washington as a direct challenge to the United States, they had little reason to doubt the credibility of the US commitment to protect Japan. Today the tables are turning—it is the US that has concerns about getting entangled in a Japanese dispute with China about sovereignty over a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea. Japanese for their part wonder whether they can have full confidence in America's commitment to take Japan's side in the event of a confrontation with China. The entanglement/abandonment dynamic of alliance management is fundamentally different now from what it was during the Cold War and it leaves Japanese feeling more insecure.

Knowledgeable Japanese understand that the United States will remain for years to come the most powerful nation in Asia and globally and that alliance with it must form the bedrock of Japanese security policy. This is a consensus view in Japan rejected only at the margins by small minorities on the left and right. But it is true as well that no matter how much emphasis the US gives to a rebalancing to Asia, it cannot regain the position of unchallenged primacy that it enjoyed for so many decades. China does not have to match America's military power to pose a formidable challenge to US dominance. Its thrust for regional power and its economically dominant position in East Asia will continue to gain

strength over time. This is the new reality that Japanese foreign policy makers are trying to cope with.

Japanese are nothing if not realists about international power, and the realities that Japan is facing are pushing forward policy change in interesting ways. First, and somewhat counter intuitively, it has weakened the voices of those who have long called for a foreign policy more independent of the United States. China's rise and its anti-Japanese rhetoric and actions have made Japanese intensely aware of the critical importance of alliance with the United States, even as some of them question the credibility of America's commitments under that alliance. The result has been an effort to strengthen the alliance by increasing Japan's contribution to it.

The US and Japan are in the final stages of revising the guidelines for defense cooperation, the first revision since 1997 and one that is premised on further integrating the military forces of the two countries and widening the sphere of Japanese responsibilities. Japan has reinterpreted Article Nine repeatedly over the years to expand the definition of what is permissible in the name of self-defense and it has engaged in collective defense arrangements without calling them such at least since the early 1990s. But it has had to go through Houdini-like contortions to do so. The formal recognition of the right to engage in collective self-defense agreements makes it possible for Japan to consider military options and engage in joint planning with the United States in ways that were not possible before.

Under Prime Minister Abe Japan also has sought to develop security linkages as well as strengthen economic ties with Australia and India and countries in Southeast Asia. The operational consequences so far are minimal but there is no question but that Japan is seeking to lay the groundwork for closer security cooperation with other countries that are as concerned about maintaining a regional balance of power as Japan is.

The Abe government's foreign policy has been cautious and incremental, building on rather than radically changing policies of the governments that preceded it. The problem with Abe's foreign policy is not what he is doing; the problem is that his comments about the history of Japanese colonialism and militarism and his expressed desire to "free Japan from its postwar regime" have generated suspicions about his longer-term policy goals and intentions.

Abe is not about to change his ideological stripes but he is a realist who appears to have gotten the message that his comments about history and his pilgrimage to Yasukuni do not serve Japan's national interests. His recent statements and actions indicate that he is well aware not only that Japan does not have the ability to "contain" China even if it wished to do so but that Japan's own future well-being depends on further deepening economic ties with China and the rest of Asia. Abe is a "cautious hawk" who will strive to strengthen Japan's alliance with the United States and to search for a global role that will bring Japan prestige and respect.

Abe sometimes appears to be torn between the pull of his heartstrings, emotional and ideological,

and the dictates of his head, pragmatic and strategic. Since he has a good chance to be prime minister for several years the question of which he follows is of obvious importance. But in considering the future course of Japanese policy it is important to recognize that Prime Minister Abe governs in a democracy where deeply entrenched interest groups, a powerful bureaucracy, a competitive political party system, a free press, and a public that is strongly risk-averse combine to act as a profound check on prime ministerial power. Japan will become more of a factor in the regional balance of power in coming years. But forecasts of dramatic and discontinuous change in Japanese foreign policy are no more likely to be right this time than they were in years past.