

Operational Impacts of Japan's New Security Strategy and Capabilities on the U.S.-Japan Alliance

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Thank you for those kind introductions, Junko and Susan.

It is a great honor for me to accept the position of Chairman of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation-USA. Sasakawa has a long and distinguished record of contributing to better international understanding in many areas. I plan to make Sasakawa's role here in Washington even more influential in coming months and years. As East Asia is becoming the most powerful region of the globe, the U.S.-Japan Alliance is even more important as the foundation for building continued security, prosperity and development of democratic and free market values in that region and beyond.

It is relatively straightforward to describe the desired operational outcomes of Japan's current sequence of changes to its defense policies and forces. It began with the upgrading of the Japan Defense Agency to a ministry in 2007, proceeded through the establishment of a National Security Council, enactment of a state secrets law, development of a national security strategy and consideration of Japan's potential participation in collective self-defense. Prime Minister Abe has followed a steady course towards the simple goal of Japan directing its armed forces through government policy. This is the practice of all the rest of the world's democracies, but in the past, the operational employment of Japan's armed forces has been through a unique and awkward process of constitutional rulings on tactical missions. In practice, these procedures have sharply limited an effective contribution by Japan's forces both to common missions with the United States and to UN peacekeeping operations.

From the American point of view, we would like to be able to operate with Japan's Self Defense Forces the way we operate, for example, with NATO forces. American and Japanese maritime and air forces, in particular, have interoperable communications systems, common procedures and many of the same weapons systems. Ideally Japanese aircraft, ships and missile batteries should be formed into combined task forces with U.S. aircraft, ships and missile batteries to deal with common threats, as decided by both governments. Both U.S. and Japanese ships and aircraft in combined task forces should have the same rules of self-defense, common designation of hostile forces, rules of engagement and ability to operate in mutual support.

The contingencies or scenarios in which these combined U.S.-Japan task forces would operate are important and are not far-fetched. However, before discussing them, I need to emphasize that I am not predicting these contingencies will actually occur. I am describing the military realities that underlie potential crises. The better the United States and Japan understand these military realities and are prepared to deal with them, the less likely it is they will happen. The forms of Japanese cooperation with the United States that would be possible under collective self-defense make aggression less likely. More robust cooperation will enhance deterrence.

I should also add that it has been ten years since I was involved in the actual American and Japanese plans for these contingencies. My views are those of an outsider, but one with military experience in the region.

In dealing with North Korean missile intimidation, Japanese and U.S. ballistic missile defense cruisers and destroyers should be part of a combined task group that includes U.S. satellite sensors and communications systems, both U.S. and Japanese shore-based radars, as well as Japanese and U.S. Patriot missile batteries in the region. South Korean systems should also be included in this defensive network. The network should be deployed and operated so that it provides protection to the Republic of Korea, Japan and the United States. Without an ability to exercise its right to collective self-defense, Japanese radars and missiles systems may be employed only to protect Japan, thus precluding Tokyo from contributing to a regional air defense network. A regional network with these restrictions is operationally difficult to control and provides a less effective defense. More important, it provides North Korea with many opportunities to play Japan, South Korea and the United States against one other, and increase the likelihood of North Korean provocations.

In the event of major North Korean aggression against the Republic of Korea, Japanese contributions to defeating the attack would be vital. It is very much in Japan's national interest to defeat North Korea quickly and decisively. As in the first Korean War, Japan would be the transportation and logistics rear base for American reinforcements to Combined Forces Command in Korea. Now, however, as many U.S. bases in Japan are ranged by North Korean missiles, the United States would expect Japan to defend those bases as part of a regional air and missile defense network. In addition, there would be an air and sea bridge from Japan to South Korea, and Japan would be expected to defend that bridge against air attacks, submarine attacks and mining. To meet these expectations and conduct missions that would bring the conflict to an end more quickly, the JSDF must be able to engage in collective self-defense.

Turning to military contingencies in the East China Sea, Japan has stated that it will remove any foreign forces that land on the Senkakus. Japan expects the United States to support a recapture operation. In a dynamic military operation of this nature, there would be instances in which American ships and aircraft would engage hostile forces threatening Japanese ships and aircraft, and instances in which Japanese ships and aircraft would engage hostile forces that threatened American ships and aircraft. It is more dangerous to the ships and aircraft of both countries if Japanese ships and aircraft are permitted only to protect themselves, and it makes a less effective combined task force.

In a Taiwan scenario many of the considerations would be similar to those in a conflict on the Korean Peninsula. American forces helping defend Taiwan against unprovoked aggression would be operating from U.S. and Japanese bases in Japan, and Japan would be expected to defend those bases against hostile missile attacks. There would be a sea and air bridge from U.S. bases in Japan to Taiwan, and the Japanese navy and air forces would be expected to help protect the Japanese end of that bridge against air, submarine and missile attacks. For JSDF forces to carry out these missions they need the authority to engage in collective self-defense.

In the past the capabilities of potential regional aggressors were relatively weak, so that the United States and Japan could achieve their common objectives without their forces operating together in an integrated fashion. Current trends and future projections, however, are not positive, and unless collective self-defense can be realized, it will take much higher levels of force on both the American and Japanese sides to keep the level of operational risk from increasing.

The prohibition on collective self-defense also limits Japanese participation in international peacekeeping operations. Japan currently sends civil affairs units—medical, construction, election monitors—but not units capable of defending themselves. There are many UN operations around the world that are preventing widespread suffering and death, and that need capable and disciplined blue-helmeted units that can enforce the peace. Japan, as a country that believes in and supports the UN mission, could make a contribution more in proportion to its power and influence. It should be able to deploy armed and effective units that can keep the peace in an assigned sector of a UN operation.

The JSDF has the platforms, weapons, communications equipment, doctrine and trained personnel to perform all the missions that I have discussed. What it does not have is the system to provide clear political direction when a crisis occurs so that it can form a task force, then join a bilateral or multilateral force as a full partner.

The very capable officers of the JSDF do not conduct military planning like their counterparts in the other powerful democratic countries of the world—receiving policy guidance from their government based on Japan's interests and objectives then proposing military courses of action to carry out that guidance. Rather, they must devise individual tactical missions that can be permitted under current constitutional interpretations. These tactical missions then are vetted within the government and are often subject to long delays that undermine their effectiveness.

Japanese military deployments in recent years resulting from this process have an almost unblemished record of missed opportunities to deploy self-defense forces to protect Japanese and wider international interests. All these operations took place after strong internal government and often public debates within Japan. The debates centered not so much on whether they were missions that would protect Japan's interests, but on whether they conformed to the extant constitutional interpretation.

In the mid-1980s Japan did not protect its oil tankers from attacks by Iraq and Iran in the Persian Gulf.

In the First Gulf War, Japan dispatched capable minesweeping units, but only after the war was over.

In 1992, a Japanese contingent of engineers and policemen sent to Cambodia abandoned their posts due to safety concerns.

In 1999, Japan failed to join 22 other countries that contributed forces to the Australian-led peacekeeping operation in East Timor.

In 2002, the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force set up a refueling station in the Indian Ocean for American and other ships, far from the location of the Afghan War they were supporting.

Of course Japan must follow its constitution, as must any country. We Americans are not the best example of a country that has updated its own. We have a second amendment based on the era of colonial militias that provides a tiny minority of Americans a rationale for opposing gun control measures that are favored by the overwhelming majority of their countrymen.

However for Japan, collective self-defense limitations are making it more and more difficult for it not only to play a role in the world commensurate with its influence and its interests, but also to take basic actions to defend its security in cooperation with its ally, the United States. The security environment in which Japan finds itself is changing; we who are friends of Japan should help it play the positive role of which it is capable.

With the record of missed opportunities, and the security environment in which Japan finds itself, it is no wonder that many Japanese leaders feel that it is past time for Japan's security procedures to be updated so that Japan can make its military deployment decisions like any other democracy: identify the national interests at stake, consult friends and allies, determine the role of military force in protecting Japanese interests, then assign the appropriate mission and forces to the military commander. Prime Minister Abe has been the most active Japanese leader who thinks this way, and he has moved out to implement these ideas. We will hear this afternoon from another Japanese leader—Shigeru Ishiba—who also is a strong supporter of modernizing Japan's defense policies.

Americans should understand that these leaders are all staunch supporters of the U.S.-Japan alliance, but they also believe that the alliance should be more equal, with Japan playing a more equal role in making decisions and setting policies than it has in the past. If these leaders are successful, Japan will be a stronger partner of the United States in pursuing our common interests, but it will also be a partner with its own opinions on how those interests should be pursued. The relationship will, and should be, more balanced.

However, there are others in Japan who feel very differently about their country's use of military force. As Japan is wrestling with these important questions, Americans need to understand the other side of the public debate.

Some of those opposing a more normal set of policies for Japan's use of military force are motivated by admirable, principled reasons; others by narrow-minded, and even selfish reasons.

On the narrow-minded and selfish side, there are the free-riders, who like the current, unbalanced nature of the Japan-U.S. defense Treaty. They believe that Japan can rely on the United States to bear the full burden of providing security around the world, and that Japan should allow it to do so.

Also on the narrow-minded side are those who believe that the current very limited Japanese deployments of forces that I described may not have been very successful, but they have led to no great harm to Japanese interests, so why make any changes? If anything, Japanese military deployments can be further reduced.

On the principled side, there are the genuine pacifists in Japan. They believe that Japan has given up the right to use military force except for self-defense, that the constitution reflects this decision, and so are opposed to any wider use of Japanese military force.

Also on the principled side are those who point out that there has not been a single Japanese soldier, sailor or airman killed in an overseas military operation since World War II. They are proud of this record and do not want to break it.

It is these contending points of view that make the issue of engaging in collective self-defense so controversial in Japan. Polling results show variations, but the numbers in favor of constitutional reinterpretation to permit this change are around half. Support seems to be higher among elected officials.

So what should those of us who are friends of Japan do? How can we be helpful?

It is tempting just to root for strong action by Prime Minister Abe, hoping he will use his political capital to force through the necessary changes.

However, in order for a change as major as this to endure in the democratic Japanese political system, it must be done after robust debate and with a measure of support across major parties. If it is done as a partisan political action, it risks being reversed if the government changes. Americans should favor changes that garner broad-based support, even if they do not go as far as we would like.

At the same time, American friends of Japan should not hesitate in showing support for Japan taking more responsibility for common security concerns. The security environment has changed fundamentally since the Yoshida doctrine was fashioned, and it is appropriate for the U.S.-Japan relationship to be much more balanced in both its objectives and its burdens.

From a military point of view, American and Japanese forces need to continue realistic military planning for the various contingencies that we may face together in East Asia and around the world. This planning, whether by conference, war game or staff talks should illuminate the full range of combined operations that American and Japanese forces could face together. At the initial stage, they should not be constrained by the current limitations Japan imposes on itself in terms of collective self-defense. The final decisions should be made by the elected government, based on the constitution, laws and policy. But only by providing a full military analysis along with courses of action will Japanese national security leaders understand the risks and benefits of various degrees of collective self-defense.

Finally, the United States should continue to make it clear to other countries in the region—South Korea and China, especially—and around the world, that we very much favor Japan playing a bigger role in addressing common security challenges. We should actively oppose and discredit groundless accusations that these Japanese actions constitute a threat to peace and security, much less that Japanese militarism is being reborn. As Prime Minister Abe put it last year, “Even if we reactivated the right to have a collective self-defense or amended Article 9 of the constitution, that would only put Japan in the same position as the other countries around the globe... We would still be in a more limited position than the Canadians.” I’m sure the Prime Minister meant no disrespect to the Canadians.

There has been no country in the world that has followed a more responsible, restrained and defensive security policy than Japan over the last 70 years. The Japan Self Defense Forces are under the strict political control of its democratic government, and will be employed responsibly under any changes to the constitution or its interpretation. We should support a Japan that can play a more active and responsible role in dealing with the security challenges we face together.

Thank you for your attention, I look forward to comments and questions.